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NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE: AN ISLAMIC STATE WAY OF WAR

by

Michael V. DiPietro

December 2019

Co-Advisors:

Michael E. Freeman
Craig A. Whiteside

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UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE: AN ISLAMIC STATE WAY OF WAR

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Major, United States Army
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN DEFENSE ANALYSIS

from the

**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
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ABSTRACT

Despite its military defeat, and the collapse of its so-called caliphate in 2018, the Islamic State has seemingly expanded to several other areas around the world. This thesis develops a theory of unconventional warfare to examine why and how the Islamic State has expanded outside of its core area in Iraq. This study reveals that the Islamic State's expansion fits within its stated ideology to create an Islamic caliphate and that it has done so by using methods that were evaluated and tested in Iraq. Through the sponsorship of Jabhat al Nusra in Syria, Islamic State-Khorasan Province in Afghanistan, and Islamic State-West Africa in Nigeria, the Islamic State conducted unconventional warfare by leveraging control over the population, implementing organizational control, exploiting various opportunities, and providing external support to local jihadist organizations in order to establish recognized franchises in these locations. This research allows the reader to better understand why the Islamic State expanded outside of Iraq and offers insight into the methods and techniques used by the Islamic State to expand.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data
AF/PAK	Afghanistan and Pakistan
AQI	al Qaeda in Iraq
AQIM	al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
BH	Boko Haram
FATA	Federally Administered Tribal Areas
FSA	Free Syrian Army
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
IS	Islamic State
IS-Central	Islamic State - Central
ISGS	Islamic State in Greater Sahara
ISWA	Islamic State West Africa
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
IS-K	Islamic State - Khorasan Province
JN	Jabhat al Nusra
PE	Preparation of the Environment
TTP	Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan
UW	unconventional warfare

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I. INTRODUCTION

The war against the Islamic State (IS) is a global conflict. Since 2014, a 79-nation coalition has been at war with IS, a war that has seen fronts open up across the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and Africa.¹ IS has grown into dozens of recognized *wilayats* (IS officially recognized provinces) and unofficial franchises around the world. IS has used its model of political-military success to expand outside of Iraq, which has drawn the interest of fledgling or struggling jihadist organizations worldwide.² As early as 2013, IS deliberately acted to establish a branch in Syria. In January 2015, IS announced the establishment of IS-Khorasan: a wilayat consisting of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia, Iran, and parts of India and Russia.³ In March 2015, a faction of Boko Haram in Nigeria officially became known as IS West Africa.⁴ In each of these cases, IS began planning and executing its expansion to these areas well before the collapse of the *caliphate*, and in some cases, before its announcement.⁵

The debate about the IS's expansion has resulted in several explanatory theories. Some believe that IS is not a state but rather, a terrorist organization and that controlling

¹ For the purposes of this research, I will use the name Islamic State (IS) or Islamic State-Central (IS-Central) when referring to the core of the Islamic State organization. Franchises and other IS related entities will be addressed specifically. Literature and the press have commonly referred to the Islamic State as the following: ISIS for the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham or the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, ISIL for the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, and Daesh for the transliteration of the Arabic spelling of ISIL. Vera Mironova and Karam Alhamad, "The Names of Jihad," *Foreign Affairs*, July 14, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-07-14/names-jihad>.

² Jibran Ahmad and Mohammad Stanekzai, "Disenchanted Militants in South Asia Eye Islamic State with Envy - Reuters," *Reuters*, January 21, 2015, sec. World News, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-southasia-insight/disenchanted-militants-in-south-asia-eye-islamic-state-with-envy-idUSKBN0KU2VC20150121>.

³ Antonio Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan: Afghanistan, Pakistan and the New Central Asian Jihad* (London: Hurst & Company, 2018), 2.

⁴ Robert Postings, "Nigeria's Military Struggles with Islamic State: Part 1 – an Upsurge in Attacks," *The Defense Post*, January 15, 2019, <https://thedefensepost.com/2019/01/15/nigeria-military-struggles-islamic-state-iswa-part-1-upsurge-in-attacks/>.

⁵ October 20, 2018 Coalition backed forces secured all of Raqqa, Syria, the capital of the IS caliphate. On March 23, 2019, Coalition backed forces announced that the last IS stronghold in Syria was captured.; Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS Caliphate Crumbles as Last Village in Syria Falls," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/23/world/middleeast/isis-syria-caliphate.html>.

physical territory in the Middle East is not as important to the group as its expansion to new safe havens in other locations.⁶ Others believe that IS was a “Rogue State” and that its franchises and external branches have assumed the Islamic State’s now “Stateless Ideology.”⁷ Yet others would call IS expansion a side-show compared to its eventual reemergence on the internet through a virtual caliphate.⁸ While each argument has merit, much of the collective analysis fails to address why and how IS has expanded outside of its core area in Iraq. To answer these questions, we must examine and interpret IS as it truly sees itself—a state sponsoring a global Islamic insurgency.⁹

The Islamic State is seeking to build an empire much like the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258 AD) which, at its peak, ruled from Northern Africa to Afghanistan.¹⁰ In 2019, after the defeat of the physical caliphate in Iraq and Syria, IS cells and operations moved underground.¹¹ IS has survived and thrived for over two decades and current indications show that the group continues to operate through their well-established networks within

⁶ Jessica Anderson, “ISIS: State or Terror Group?,” *Small Wars Journal*, n.d., <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/isis-state-or-terror-group>; Barack Obama, “President Obama: ‘We Will Degrade and Ultimately Destroy ISIL’” (Speech, September 10, 2014), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2014/09/10/president-obama-we-will-degrade-and-ultimately-destroy-isisl>.

⁷ Megan Specia, “The Evolution of ISIS: From Rogue State to Stateless Ideology,” *The New York Times*, March 20, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/20/world/middleeast/isis-history-facts-islamic-state.html>.

⁸ Haroro J. Ingram and Whiteside, Craig, “In Search of the Virtual Caliphate: Convenient Fallacy, Dangerous Distraction,” *War on the Rocks* (blog), September 27, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/09/in-search-of-the-virtual-Caliphate-convenient-fallacy-dangerous-distraction/>.

⁹ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “The Syrian Rebel Groups Pulling in Foreign Fighters,” *Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi* (blog), December 24, 2013, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/14190/the-syrian-rebel-groups-pulling-in-foreign>; “‘Clashing of the Swords’ - New ISIS Nasheed from Ajnad Media,” June 18, 2014, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2014/06/clashing-of-the-swords-new-isis-nasheed-from>.

¹⁰ William McCants, “Why ISIS Really Wants to Conquer Baghdad,” *Brookings Markaz* (blog), November 12, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2014/11/12/why-isis-really-wants-to-conquer-baghdad/>; Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” *The Atlantic*, March 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>.

¹¹ Syrian Democratic Forces declare victory over IS on March 22, 2019. Linda Givetash, “ISIS Defeated Say U.S.-Backed Forces, Declaring Total Victory in Syria,” *NBC News*, March 23, 2019, Online edition, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/u-s-backed-forces-declare-victory-over-isis-syria-n972401>.

Iraq and Syria, despite military defeat.¹² In April 2019, IS claimed responsibility for attacks in Sri Lanka, attempted a terror attack in Saudi Arabia, and successfully executed an attack against military forces in the border areas of the Democratic Republic of Congo.¹³ The Islamic State remains a lethal and agile enemy.¹⁴

One way to better understand the Islamic State, is to analyze IS as a state executing unconventional warfare (UW).¹⁵ Using UW as a lens to examine IS provides us with the opportunity to understand many of its core activities and its organizational resilience. I argue that IS deliberately employed its own version UW to expand outside of Iraq and began doing so with its expansion to Syria in 2011. This research will provide insight into IS's desire to expand, and, assess why and how IS conducts UW outside of its core areas in Iraq through an examination of three IS case studies; 1) IS operations in Syria in 2011, 2) the establishment of IS-Khorasan in Afghanistan in 2014, and 3) the establishment of IS West Africa in Nigeria in 2015. These case studies were chosen for two reasons; 1) collectively, these cases provide examples of IS UW and expansion over a long period of time (2011-2019), and 2) they allow for the examination of IS UW practices in different geographic regions and varied demographic groups.

The second section of this paper will examine the relevant literature on UW, insurgency, revolution, and IS strategy to develop a theory of UW that helps explain how IS develops and executes its UW strategy. Section three will look at the first recorded case of IS expansion and use of UW through its sponsorship of Jabhat al Nusra (JN) in Syria.

¹² "Operation INHERENT RESOLVE: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress," Lead IG Report (Washington, DC: Office of the Inspector General U.S. Department of Defense, April 1, 2019), pp. 2, 20, 42, https://media.defense.gov/2019/Aug/06/2002167167/-1/-1/1/Q3FY2019_LEADIG_OIR_REPORT.PDF.

¹³ Aymenn al-Tamimi and Charlie Winter, "ISIS Relaunches as a Global Platform," *The Atlantic*, April 27, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/the-sri-lanka-bombings-were-a-preview-of-isis-future/588175/>.

¹⁴ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Islamic State: Baqiya?," *Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi* (blog), May 16, 2017, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/19918/the-islamic-state-baqiya>.

¹⁵ The Joint U.S. doctrine definition of UW is "activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerilla force in a denied area." A detailed discussion of UW will be followed in the next section of this thesis. *US Army Training Circular 18-01.1 Unconventional Warfare Mission Planning Guide for the Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha Level* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 2016), 1-1.

Section four will address IS expansion to Afghanistan and the establishment of IS-Khorasan; Section five will look at IS-West Africa; and, finally Section six will discuss findings and conclusions.

This thesis will not attempt to compare IS to other insurgent or revolutionary organizations. First, IS and the franchises this research examines are robust and unique compared to other potential peer groups. Additionally, IS's establishment of franchises outside the Middle East and within varying cultures makes their model unique, flexible, and adaptable to diverse situations. Therefore, comparisons to other organizations exceed the scope of this thesis. Evaluations of organizations like Hezbollah would yield similarities in terms of types of operations, capabilities, and ability to govern; however, Hezbollah and IS are fundamentally different organizations.¹⁶ Hezbollah is a Shia Muslim organization and an extension of a state sponsor in Iran. Hezbollah has limited goals, mainly focused on establishing a legitimate presence in Lebanon in order to destroy the state of Israel. Hezbollah's operations within the greater Middle East are in support of Iran's political goals to disrupt competitors and threats.¹⁷ IS has a global agenda, no state sponsor, and has maintained the goal of being self-sufficient to prevent manipulation by external supporters. As a Sunni Salafist group, IS has access to much larger Muslim populations in more areas throughout the world making it more active in more locations.

While a comparison to al Qaeda is useful, as it would compare and contrast arguably the two most significant extremist organizations of the last 20 years, this too would be outside the scope of this research. Even though IS was structurally and ideologically shaped by al Qaeda, IS now focuses on competing with and distinguishing itself from its predecessor. Both organizations are a part of the *Salafi Jihad* movement and, as mentioned previously, IS grew from al Qaeda in Iraq, but philosophical differences; such as IS's use of extreme violence against other Muslims, the IS cultivation of a geo-sectarian divide, and its desire to establish a caliphate right away, are among several of the

¹⁶ For a more detailed discussion of Hezbollah see Sarah Cohler, "Hezbollah: Analysis of Violence," *American Diplomacy*, March 2011, <http://americandiplomacy.web.unc.edu/2011/03/hezbollah-analysis-of-violence/>.

¹⁷ Tony Badran, *What Is Hezbollah?* (PragerU, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8DX-hjPYwjs>.

reasons that forced the groups to split. and unwillingness to IS's announcement of the its caliphate in 2014 propelled the group ahead of al Qaeda in terms of legitimacy, notoriety, funding, and recruiting.¹⁸ As Gerges explains, "ISIS is waging a two-pronged offensive to demolish the post–World War I 'colonialist' borders, and [to] gain leadership of the global jihadist movement. The rise of ISIS represents a generational and ideological rupture with previous iterations of Salafi-jihadism."¹⁹

¹⁸ Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 228–33.

¹⁹ Gerges, 236–37.

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II. A THEORY OF UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE

Simply put, UW is the external sponsorship of revolutions, resistance movements, and insurgencies by international actors, to achieve the actor's desired interests abroad.²⁰ While supporting revolutions, resistance movements, and insurgencies has a long history, UW, as a strategy, is uniquely relevant today because insurgency has surpassed interstate war as the most common form of armed conflict. These conflicts provide international actors with more ways of accomplishing their objectives, particularly when diplomacy is stalled, and without major military intervention, since indigenous irregular forces are employed.²¹

The doctrinal U.S. military definition of UW is “activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area.”²² UW is an indirect approach to warfare and a tool of statecraft

²⁰ Maxwell states “unconventional warfare at its core is about revolution, resistance, and insurgency (RRI) combined with the external support provided to a revolution, resistance, or insurgency by either the U.S. or others” David S. Maxwell, “Do We Really Understand Unconventional Warfare?” *Small Wars Journal*, accessed December 9, 2018, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/do-we-really-understand-unconventional-warfare>.

²¹ Insurgency is “the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region.” An insurgency is a form of intrastate conflict. Interstate war is characterized as wars between states which are members of the international system. According to the Center for Army Lessons Learned, irregular forces include paramilitary organizations, guerillas, militias, gangs, mercenaries, or criminal networks. Christopher Paul et al., *Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2013). xvii, *Joint Publication 3-24: Counterinsurgency* (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018), 4, http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_24.pdf?ver=2018-05-11-102418-000; Merideth Reid Sarkees, *Inter-State Wars: Definitions and Variables*, 4th ed. (Correlates of War Project, n.d.), <http://www.correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/COW-war/inter-state-wars-codebook>. Paul et al., *Paths to Victory*; *Joint Publication 3-24: Counterinsurgency*, 4; Sarkees, *Inter-State Wars: Definitions and Variables*; Jenny Solon, ed., *Irregular Warfare: A SOF Perspective*, vol. 11–34, Newsletter (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2011), <https://call2.army.mil/toc.aspx?document=6698&filename=/docs/doc6698/11-34.pdf>.

²² “The current joint definition for UW as approved by the Commander of USSOCOM in October 2009. USSOCOM’s proponent for UW is USASOC. The commanders of USSOCOM and USASOC could initiate the process to revise the definition at their discretion; however, until such time as any such revision is completed, this definition is authoritative. Moreover, the breakdown of the definition above is deliberate and unambiguous. The unclassified breakdown of the definition is verbiage taken verbatim from USSOCOM Directive 525–89, (U) Unconventional Warfare (S/NF). The components of the definition are likewise authoritative.” *US Army Training Circular 18–01.1 Unconventional Warfare Mission Planning Guide for the Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha Level*, 1–1.

which accomplishes objectives through the core activities of subversion, sabotage, Guerilla warfare, and psychological operations to achieve three strategic outcomes: coercing, disrupting, or overthrowing an opposing government, regime, or state-like entity.²³ In this context, UW employs special-purpose military personnel (advisors) partnered with indigenous personnel (underground, auxiliary, and guerillas) in their native territory (denied area) to seek a behavioral modification (coerce, disrupt) of an adversarial regime or occupier, or its removal (overthrow).²⁴ The term UW is commonly used in a U.S. military context, specifically involving U.S. Army Special Forces, however, UW is not solely an American endeavor.²⁵ Other nation states and, to an extent, non-state actors employ UW as a form of surrogate or proxy warfare in which they execute military operations to present adversarial regimes and groups with threats and dilemmas or to destabilize a region or state to build maneuver space for other operations and retain influence over a situation of interest.²⁶ As David Maxwell writes,

We are seeing variations of UW conducted by the Russians and their New Generation Warfare, the Chinese and their Three Warfares, and the Iranian Action Network. And finally, groups like Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) are conducting variations of UW (though ISIL might be said to have completed its UW campaign and is now functioning like a quasi-state).²⁷

²³ Ivan Arreguín-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict," *International Security* 26, no. 1 (2001): 105. "Unconventional Warfare Fundamentals," *The Irregular Warrior*, September 14, 2017, <http://irregularwarrior.com/unconventional-warfare>; Arreguín-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars," 105; U.S. Army Training Circular 18-01.1 *Unconventional Warfare Mission Planning Guide for the Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha Level*, 2-53.

²⁴ "The *Underground* is a covert or clandestine, cellular element within the resistance or insurgency that can conduct political, military, or special purpose operations in areas denied to the Guerillas. The *Guerillas* are the overt, generally irregular military component of the insurgency. The *Auxiliary* are a portion of the civilian population providing active support to the resistance or insurgency by using their normal lives and occupations as a cover for their actions." Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 3-05.1: Unconventional Warfare* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2015).

²⁵ The Joint definition of UW "includes activities to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating with an underground, auxiliary, or guerrilla force in a denied area." *Department of Defense*. I-2.

²⁶ Andrew Mumford, "Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict," *The RUSI Journal* 158, no. 2 (April 2013): 40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2013.787733>.

²⁷ Maxwell, "Do We Really Understand Unconventional Warfare?"

UW is versatile because it can be conducted in advance of or in support of a large-scale conflict or as a stand-alone method of warfare. Unconventional Warfare can prepare the battlefield for the introduction of conventional forces using subversion, sabotage, and intelligence collection through and with indigenous counterparts.²⁸ As a stand-alone effort, UW can take the form of a protracted behind-the-scenes war against the enemy.

Aaron Zelin's examination of IS territorial expansion draws considerable comparisons to UW. Zelin describes the IS model in two major phases, pre-territorial control and post-territorial control. During these phases IS executes five primary activities: intelligence, military, *dawa* (religious activities), *hisba* (secret or moral policing), and governance.²⁹ IS intelligence activities focus on infiltrating, coopting, or sponsoring other organizations and groups, establishing cells to collect information on rivals, and learning the area. The military operations consist of asymmetric warfare such as car bombings, ambushes, assassinations, and roadside bombs. Success in military operations allows IS to begin controlling territory. Once in control of territory, IS implements its *dawa* initiatives which include, community outreach, religious education, and indoctrination. In conjunction with the *dawa* phase, IS conducts *hisba* activities to ensure the purity of Islam. *Hisba* activities consist of burning cigarettes and alcohol, destroying religious and historic artifacts, ensuring that civilian pray and abide by the laws instituted by IS. Lastly, IS begins governance operations in which the group develops a judicial body, levies taxes, and provides essential services.³⁰

Examination of UW concepts and the related literature reveal four critical pillars of UW: 1) external support, 2) the population, 3) organizational control functions, and 4) opportunities.

²⁸ Irwin chronicles the *Jedburghs* a Coalition Special Operations Unit during World War II, tasked to conduct Unconventional Warfare through indigenous partners behind enemy lines in support of Allied Major Combat Operations against the Nazis. Will Irwin, *The Jedburghs: The Secret History of the Allied Special Forces, France 1944* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009), 5–7, <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=729370>.

²⁹ Aaron Y Zelin, "The Islamic State's Territorial Methodology," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy Research Notes*, no. 29 (January 2016): 1.

³⁰ Zelin, 1–4.

A. EXTERNAL SUPPORT

The difference between insurgency or resistance movements and UW is the aspect of deliberate external support by an outside actor to achieve strategic endstates in and against adversarial states or occupying powers.³¹ A sponsor can leverage support to groups involved to influence the outcome of a conflict toward a favorable end. UW draws its roots from George Kennan’s concept of “political warfare”:

Political warfare is the logical application of Clausewitz’s doctrine in time of peace. In broadest definition, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. Such operations are both overt and covert. They range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures (as ERP--the Marshall Plan), and “white” propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of “friendly” foreign elements, “black” psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states.³²

Similarly, a RAND report defines political warfare as “the intentional use of one or more of the implements of [national] power—diplomatic/political, information/cyber, military/intelligence, and economic—to affect the political composition or decision making in a state.”³³ Both definitions of political warfare are broad and encompass many ways that actors can shape outcomes short of overt military operations. UW is also a broad concept, that can include a wide range of supporting, activities from providing overt political backing to the clandestine employment of advisors and contribution of funding, training, and equipment.

³¹ According to Maxwell, occupying powers can be non-state actors or terrorist groups, controlling terrain within a country. Maxwell, “Do We Really Understand Unconventional Warfare?”

³² George Keenan, “Policy Planning Staff Memo” (National Archives and Records Administration, RG 273, Records of the National Security Council, NSC 10/2., May 4, 1948), <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/history/johnson/65ciafounding3.htm>.

³³ Linda Robinson et al., “The Growing Need to Focus on Modern Political Warfare,” Product Page (RAND Corporation, National Defense Research Institute, 2019), 1, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10071.html.

Providing sanctuary for insurgent groups can also be considered external support.³⁴ While Mao, Che, and Lenin did not specifically address external support in their work, all three benefited from external support during their campaigns. The Soviet Union provided Mao's communist guerillas with materiel support during the Chinese Civil War, Mexico provided Che and Fidel Castro's 26th of July Movement with training areas and safe haven as they prepared for their operations in Cuba, and Germany helped to fund the Bolsheviks and allowed Lenin safe passage back to Russia in 1919 in support of his efforts during the Russian Civil War. In these examples, each supporting state actor did so with the belief that its sponsorship of these individuals or groups would further its national interests.

A sponsor's decision to provide external support to a resistance or insurgent group is dependent on several factors and considerations within the target country or area. When weighing the decision to provide external support, a sponsor must also consider their overall strategy to ensure that the outcome of the sponsor's involvement is consistent with its national interests. Without these considerations and a recognition of favorable conditions on the ground, the execution of UW may be an untenable course of action.³⁵

B. THE POPULATION

Perhaps the most critical condition for successful UW is the support of a sizeable portion of the resident population within the target country or, at the very least, the ability to influence or coerce a large portion of the population.³⁶ A population supportive of a government or change agent lends credibility and legitimacy to that group. Additionally,

³⁴ This chapter discusses "Safe Haven and Transit" as forms of external support in which neighboring, supporting states allow insurgents to seek sanctuary across borders. Daniel L Byman et al., "Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements," in *Assessing the Impact of External Support* (RAND, 2001), 13, <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/www/external/congress/terrorism/phase2/insurgent.pdf>.

³⁵ JP 3-05.1 and TC 18-01.1 discuss completion of a UW Feasibility Assessment during the decision planning for UW. The U.S. Feasibility Assessment addresses the presence of the following conditions as key for success 1) an indigenous partner willing to, capable of, and appropriate for U.S. support 2) favorable environmental and terrain conditions that provide the resistance or insurgency with suitable safe haven, 3) a portion of the relevant population within the country that is supportive of the resistance movement or insurgency, 3) a weakened or unconsolidated government or occupying power. Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 3-05.1: Unconventional Warfare*.

³⁶ Seth G Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare Lessons From the Vietcong to the Islamic State* (New York, N.Y: Oxford University Press, 2017), 38.

the population is key for identifying common grievances, developing shared ideology, and leveraging or extracting resources.

1. Legitimacy

Legitimacy, in the context of UW, encompasses the character or rightness of the parties involved but also speaks to the capabilities they each have. Supportive populations provide governments or groups with legitimacy through trust and action. If the population believes that their goals and interests will be met through the decisions and actions of the government, group, or organization they support, then they will offer their trust.³⁷ Action follows trust. Action is the population's willingness to conform to and obey rules and laws.³⁸ Once the population trusts and acts on that trust, then the group or government gains legitimacy which, in turn, lends justification to their actions. UW seeks to build legitimacy of insurgent and resistance groups by eroding popular support of the adversary by challenging its legitimacy, ability to protect the people, and degrading its military capacity.

In terms of how capabilities relate to legitimacy, Charles Tilly outlines "Four State Activities": 1) war making, the capacity to eliminate external threats with an advantage in violence, 2) state making, the capacity to eliminate internal threats with a monopoly over organized violence, 3) protection, the capacity to eliminate the enemies of their clients (external and/or internal), and 4) extraction, acquiring a means of carrying out the first three activities.³⁹ The capacity for states to execute each of these functions provides them with legitimacy in terms of how traditional state actors behave within the recognized international system.

³⁷ David Easton, "A Re-Assessment of the Concept of Political Support," *British Journal of Political Science* 5, no. 4 (1975): 447–48.

³⁸ Easton, 451; Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Free Press, 1964), 382.

³⁹ Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter Evans, Rueschemeyer Dietrich, and Theda Skocpol (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 181.

The rebel attack on the La Plata army outpost during the Cuban Revolution is an example of legitimacy shifting from the state government to the insurgency. The battle was a humiliating defeat for the Cuban military and, to avoid future losses, Batista's forces withdrew from several smaller outposts across Cuba that were minimally manned and not easily defended, effectively ceding terrain to the insurgents.⁴⁰ The attack demonstrated that Castro's insurgency was capable of matching the Cuban military, thereby reaching capability parity with the state's forces. The success of the attack coupled with the growing popular support for Castro throughout Cuba, showed that the insurgency was becoming the legitimate alternative to the government.

2. Ideology

While academia has seemingly countless definitions for ideology, Assaf Moghadam synthesizes the four characteristics common to most. First, ideologies create an "in-group" or collection of individuals with similar beliefs and economic, political, or social backgrounds. Next, ideology identifies the "out-group" or people perceived to be responsible for the problems experienced by the in-group. Third, ideology develops a group identity which encompasses the collective characteristics of those within the in-group. Lastly, ideology creates solutions to problems experienced by the in-group and advocates for action to effectively address them.⁴¹ Ideology in UW is critical because an ideology of resistance highlights the social, economic, or political problems which exist among the population and can be used to unify people around a cause.

Additionally, Snow and Byrd's work on cultural framing explains how ideology is developed and messaged internally and externally. Framing can be broken down in to three categories; diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational. Diagnostic framing contributes to the in-group and the out-group creation in that it is deployed to identify a group's problems and where or who to assign blame to for those problems. Prognostic framing develops concepts for what actions need to be taken to address the problem. Motivational framing

⁴⁰ Jose A. Moreno, "Che Guevara on Guerrilla Warfare: Doctrine, Practice and Evaluation," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 12, no. 4 (April 1970): 124–25.

⁴¹ Assaf Moghadam, "The Salafi-Jihad as a Religious Ideology," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point Sentinel* 1, no. 3 (2008): 3.

shapes group narratives to facilitate action.⁴² Ideology in UW is critical because it highlights grievances, i.e., the social, economic, or political problems which exist among the population and can be used to unify people around a cause.

Theories of how agency and culture impacts revolutions speak to the importance of ideology within resistance movements and insurgencies. While some theories of revolution are based on structural causes such as, the relationships or conflicts between states and groups, Eric Selbin believes that “revolutions do not come, they are made” through the use of ideas, symbology, shared values, stories, and world views.⁴³

Other theorists highlight Marxist Communism, Socialism, or extremist interpretations of religion as the drivers for revolutionary action. In each case, the four characteristics of ideology are present. Marxism’s “two great hostile camps” created an in-group out of the workers or proletariat who were exploited by the out-group capitalists or bourgeois.⁴⁴ Marxist and Leninist in-group identities and revolutionary action proposals are also consistent. The proletariat is depicted as slave-like underdogs who must unite against their oppressors to seize power and change the system.⁴⁵

Extremist ideologies and interpretations of religion are complex and vary within and across groups. Additionally, these types of ideology can evolve or change over time depending on changes to external influences or internal group dynamics.⁴⁶ Salafism for example, has many differences of opinions on revolutionary action proposals. Some groups, like al Qaeda and IS, believe that violence and terrorism must be used to achieve their endstate while other Salafists renounce the use of violence, particularly against

⁴² David A. Snow and Scott C. Byrd, “Ideology, Framing Processes, and Islamic Terrorist Movements,” *Mobilization: An International Quarterly Review* 12, no. 1 (2007): 119–36.

⁴³ Eric Selbin, “Revolution in the Real World,” in *Theorizing Revolutions: New Approaches from Across the Disciplines*, ed. John Foran (Florence, United States: Routledge, 1997), 120, 128. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=179673>.

⁴⁴ Karl Marx 1818–1883, *The Communist Manifesto* (London; Chicago, Ill. : Pluto Press, 1996., 1996), <https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/999792955802121>.

⁴⁵ Vladimir I. Lenin, “The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism,” March 1913, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1913/mar/x01.htm>; Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*.

⁴⁶ Snow and Byrd, 122.

innocent people. Salafi jihad creates a clear in-and out-group as well as a strict in-group identity consistent with its interpretation of Islam.⁴⁷

3. Grievances

Grievances among the civilian population are necessary for resistance movements and insurgencies because they provide the means for groups to drive a wedge between the government and the population. Grievances come in many forms such as oppressive laws, ineffective government representation, lack of social justice, disparate economic conditions, and ethnic or religious persecution. Grievances are the basis for propaganda and information operations and an effective mobilization tool. Additionally, grievances can create passionate and emotional responses from the population, which, further drive revolution.

Grievances are common to all revolutions. The French Revolution was in response to leadership failures and corruption by King Louis XVI, ineffective government institutions, economic disparity, and social strain.⁴⁸ Intolerable working conditions, overcrowded urban centers, the decline of Russia internationally, and an autocratic government led to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.⁴⁹ The Communist Revolutions in China were also heavily tied to popular grievances like land reform, the threat of foreign imperialism, cultural shifts away from Confucianism, and the Japanese occupation forces in northeastern China.⁵⁰

Contemporary revolutionary movements are also created and directed by grievances. al Qaeda's campaign of global jihad was founded to return Islam to prominence internationally because of the belief that Muslims all over the world have been

⁴⁷ Michael W. S Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy: The Deep Battle Against America*, 2017, 18–21.

⁴⁸ William Doyle, *The French Revolution: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions 54 (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁴⁹ John Merriman, "The Romanovs and the Russian Revolution" (Lecture, September 2, 2009), <https://oyc.yale.edu/history/hist-202/lecture-19>.

⁵⁰ Timothy Cheek, *Mao Zedong and China's Revolutions: A Brief History with Documents*, 2002, <https://link.springer.com/openurl?genre=book&isbn=978-1-349-63485-9>.

marginalized and persecuted, particularly by the west or “far enemy.”⁵¹ In his 1996 *fatwa*, Osama bin Laden outlined al Qaeda’s grievances and declared war on the United States for its role occupying the “land of the two holy places.”⁵² al Qaeda saw U.S. intervention in the Gulf War and increasing numbers of U.S. troops in Arab lands as a declaration of war against Islam. However, it is important to note here that the IS ideology represents a significant departure from al Qaeda. IS has prioritized its enemy, or in other words where its grievances reside, as 1) Shia Muslims, 2) Sunni non-believers and apostate or what IS considers to be puppet Arab regimes, and 3) America and the West.⁵³

IS ideology is deeply rooted in Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict to mobilize Sunnis and mold its narrative of being the true protector of Sunni Muslims worldwide. IS’s use of frame articulation and elaboration of the near enemy concept not only rationalizes violence against fellow Muslims, which is in direct conflict of the Koran, it justifies its actions and strengthens its in-group identity.⁵⁴ While IS has recently chosen to direct sufficient energy and resources at the United States and its western allies, the root of IS’s out-group framing remains with its adversaries and competitors in the Muslim world.

4. Resources

While external support can provide resistance movements and insurgencies with the resources (food, funding, weapons, and equipment) it requires to operate, this support may be limited by environmental factors and the nature of working in a denied area.⁵⁵ The population of a target country can provide these groups with some or all of the necessary resources to maintain themselves overtime. Overbearing resource extraction from the

⁵¹ Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda’s Strategy*, 6, 42, 56.

⁵² Osama bin Laden, “Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places,” *Al Quds Al Arabi*, August 1996, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2013/10/Declaration-of-Jihad-against-the-Americans-Occupying-the-Land-of-the-Two-Holiest-Sites-Translation.pdf>.

⁵³ Gerges, *ISIS*.

⁵⁴ Snow and Byrd, “Ideology, Framing Processes, and Islamic Terrorist Movements,” 130–32.

⁵⁵ “Denied areas are typically characterized by a politically sensitive and physically challenging environment.” Headquarters Department of the Army, *Army Techniques Publication No. 3–05.1, Change 1* (Washington, DC: HQDA, 2015), 4–4.

population can be contentious and may even push support away from resistance and insurgent groups; however, moderate resource support from the population is an effective means of sustainment.

Resistance movements and insurgencies cannot effectively operate without the assistance from the civilian population.⁵⁶ The people provide these elements with tangible resources (personnel, weapons, and money) and intangible resources (organizational skills, the ability to develop propaganda, and media products).⁵⁷ Mao's characterization of the importance in the relationship between the insurgent and the people explains that the people are the guerillas' lifeline. In his work *On Guerilla warfare*, Mao writes:

Many people think it impossible for guerrillas to exist for long in the enemy's rear. Such a belief reveals lack of comprehension of the relationship that should exist between the people and the troops. The former may be likened to water the latter to the fish who inhabit it. How may it be said that these two cannot exist together? It is only undisciplined troops who make the people their enemies and who, like the fish out of its native element cannot live.⁵⁸

al Qaeda strategist Abu Ubayd al-Qurashi also recognizes the importance of a supportive population and draws on the works of various military scholars to develop his doctrine of guerilla warfare. In his work, al-Qurashi cites German-American military historian Peter Paret, who explains that "in relation to the revolution, military force plays a secondary role; the definitive factor is the support of the people which at the same time

⁵⁶ Resistance: "Characterized as an objective of an insurgency. Resistance can be passive or aggressive; clandestine, covert, or overt; and conducted in remote, semiautonomous, or socio-politically distinct areas within a country. A resistance objective allows growth and maturing of the insurgency in numbers and capabilities, while pressuring the local and national governments." (p.II-11) Insurgents: "Members of an Insurgency or the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region. An insurgency is a form of intrastate conflict". (p.I-1) "Guerillas are one element of the insurgent military wing. They are paramilitary forces who conduct limited attacks, raids, and ambushes." (p.II-24) *Joint Publication 3-24: Counterinsurgency*.

⁵⁷ Gordon McCormick, "McCormick's Mystic Diamond" (Lecture on Irregular Warfare, 2018); Gemma Edwards, *Social Movements and Protest*, Key Topics in Sociology (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014), 44.

⁵⁸ Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, trans. Samuel B Griffith, 2013, 93, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1152764>.

forms the primary role and decisive means.”⁵⁹ As Ryan highlights, al-Qurashi habitually used established military theory as his own however, the point al-Qurashi acknowledged here is that for al Qaeda to succeed in its global jihad, it must survive, and securing support of the people is the key to its survival.⁶⁰

Obtaining resources is not limited to extraction from the population. Controlling terrain, particularly terrain that can be monetized such as arable lands for farming, lines of communication for taxation of transportation, and extraction of natural resources are also examples of how revolutionary groups can survive with limited or no external support.⁶¹

C. ORGANIZATIONAL CONTROL FUNCTIONS

Supportive segments of the population provide candidates that can be developed into key components for controlling resistance or insurgent organizations and the population. UW cannot be executed “in extremis” because it requires deliberate preparation toward building networks and relationships as well as identifying individuals with critical skills that will be leveraged during execution.⁶² Leadership in key areas, the ability to govern, and the capabilities provided by establishing networks for the auxiliary, underground, and guerilla forces are essential elements of UW.

1. Leadership

Effective leadership provides resistance movements and insurgencies with direction and focus. Leaders can also offer groups inspiration, credibility, a method of organization for the group, and serve as the figure head or voice of a movement. Leadership is not only important for imparting strategic guidance; strong leaders can steer

⁵⁹ See Peter Paret, Gordon Alexander Craig, and Felix Gilbert, eds., *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Princeton Paperbacks (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1986); Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy*, 90.

⁶⁰ Mark Stout, “The Makers of Jihadist Strategy,” *War on the Rocks*, February 4, 2014, <https://warontherocks.com/2014/02/the-makers-of-jihadist-strategy/>.

⁶¹ Craig Whiteside, “New Masters of Revolutionary Warfare: The Islamic State Movement (2002-2016),” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 4 (August 2016): 6–20.

⁶² Maxwell, “Do We Really Understand Unconventional Warfare?”

organizations and adapt to the operational environment and changes in conditions on the ground.⁶³

Strong leadership within revolutionary organizations is essential for victory in an insurgency however, types and styles of leadership are debated. Some believe in the concept of a vanguard or outside organizer. Alinsky believes that an outside organizer must demonstrate his credibility and overcome suspicion of his intentions from the population he seeks to influence.⁶⁴ The insurgent and outside organizer must play on the fissures and resentments of the population to encourage participation.⁶⁵

During the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, socialist leaders believed that before a revolution could take place, a large number of the proletarian workers must mobilize to revolt. To do so, they developed a small cadre of intellectual vanguards or intelligentsia, to lead the workers toward rebellion.⁶⁶ The Bolsheviks engaged in a long and deliberate preparation campaign through the vanguards, to agitate the workers and set conditions for the revolution.⁶⁷ The *foco* or focalism concept of insurgency drew inspiration from Marxist revolutionaries and also required a vanguard to lead and develop conditions favorable for success. The *foco* recognized the importance of popular support but mass mobilization was not necessary to be successful.⁶⁸

Leadership in a revolutionary organization can tie together many aspects of UW theory. Charismatic leaders can secure popular support by providing groups with credibility through experience or captivating public engagements, as was the case with

⁶³ Department of the Army, *Army Techniques Publication No. 3-05.1, Change 1*, 2-4.

⁶⁴ Saul David Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals*, Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 98.

⁶⁵ Paul J. Tompkins Jr., ed., *Irregular Warfare Annotated Bibliography* (Fort Bragg, NC: United States Army Special Operations Command, Fort Bragg, NC, 2011), 68.

⁶⁶ Richard Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1995), 27, 105.

⁶⁷ Robert C. Tucker, *The Marxian Revolutionary Idea*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1969), 148.

⁶⁸ According to Che, in order for the *foco* to be successful, three preconditions were required: 1. a lack of governmental legitimacy, 2. presence of "tensions" (between the population and the government) that cannot be addressed through a political process, 3. there are no effective legal channels to change the situation. Moreno, "Che Guevara on Guerrilla Warfare: Doctrine, Practice and Evaluation," 115, 118.

Fidel Castro in Cuba. In his guidance to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Mao discussed the importance of leadership in revolutions. Most importantly, he highlighted that leaders should be chosen from a group of “activists” and their decisions and actions must always be tightly connected to the “masses.” For Mao, leaders must be able to unite people and be capable of taking the needs and desires of the population then reframing those needs and desires in line with the goals of the larger movement. Mao referred to this as the concept of “from the masses, to the masses.”⁶⁹

Lastly, for many years, Osama bin Laden inspired al Qaeda as its leader by promoting its ideology and eventually influencing its evolution into a global network of decentralized regional affiliates.⁷⁰ Bin Laden’s credibility within jihadist groups was established before the attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001 but after, his notoriety and name recognition grew tremendously, thereby increasing his leadership power and the power of his organization. From having less than one hundred members in September 2001, al Qaeda has since grown to approximately 40,000 members worldwide, and bin Laden will be remembered forever.⁷¹

2. Governance

Securing victory in UW is more than a military effort. A shadow government or government in exile are key parts of a resistance or insurgency because they provide groups with governance capability and expertise.⁷² Planning for the transition from guerilla warfare to establishing or fostering local political institutions is critical in ensuring that the efforts during the UW campaign are not lost or ceded to a competing organization or rival.

⁶⁹ Mao Tse-tung, “Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership,” in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung* (China, 1943), https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_13.htm.

⁷⁰ Counter Extremism Project, “Al-Qaeda” (Counter Extremism Project, 2019), <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/al-qaeda>.

⁷¹ Christian Taylor, “Al-Qaeda Is Stronger Today Than It Was on 9/11,” *Public Radio International*, July 2, 2019, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-07-02/al-qaeda-stronger-today-it-was-911>.

⁷² The *Shadow Government* is an “irregular governmental organization that replaces and subverts the local government of the regime in power.” The *Shadow Government* can conduct security, health care, judicial system, etc. A *Government in Exile* is the “legitimate authority of a nation that has been displaced from its country of origin.” Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 3-05.1: Unconventional Warfare*.

Transition planning for the end of a UW campaign is perhaps the most vital part of the operation.⁷³

To understand the importance of effective governance, we must revisit the necessity of popular support. Revolutionary actors establish governmental systems and seek collaboration from the population; active collaboration from a small number of dedicated supporters, “passive and exclusive collaboration” from the remainder of the population, and attempt to prevent collaboration between civilians and adversaries.⁷⁴ Public administration and establishing control in a war-torn state requires significant military resources which revolutionary organizations usually lack. To mitigate this, groups may use discriminant violence to establish and maintain control as new governmental institutions take shape.⁷⁵

Insurgents cannot secure territory and population centers without a plan or means to administer the space and the population.⁷⁶ Contemporary jihadist doctrine recognizes the importance of post-conflict governance and the ability to control areas once they have been seized. In his strategy, al Qaeda’s Abu Mus’ab al-Suri explains the transition from areas under temporary control to permanent control and the eventual establishment of a state.⁷⁷ Additionally, groups like the Islamic State have adopted the Sun Tzu idea that “It is better to keep a nation intact than to destroy it. It is better to keep an army intact than to destroy it.”⁷⁸ In other words, rather than developing a new means of establishing administrative and physical control systems, groups can co-opt key pieces of the existing

⁷³ Phase VII: Transition phase of UW is “The overall transition to functional governance is part of an overall transition that includes other sectors such as security and economic development.” *Department of Defense*.

⁷⁴ Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 104.

⁷⁵ Kalyvas, 111.

⁷⁶ “As the insurgency gains control over the country, the insurgent leadership becomes responsible for the population, resources, and territory under its control. If the insurgency fails to plan and execute post-hostility activities, the population may lose confidence in the insurgency and turn to the old government, a breakaway faction, or a splinter group of the insurgency.” Department of the Army, *Army Techniques Publication No. 3-05.1, Change 1*, 2–7.

⁷⁷ Al-Suri outlines three-phases of Guerilla warfare doctrine; Stage of exhaustion, Stage of balance (or equilibrium), and Stage of decision or liberation. Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda’s Strategy*, 230.

⁷⁸ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, n.d., 66.

structures to prevent large lapses in essential services and security. IS continues to use their military and post conflict success in Mosul during their Iraq campaign in 2014 as a blueprint for future operations. In a May 2019 editorial published in the Islamic State periodical *al Naba*, the author writes of “repeating the lesson of the conquest of Mosul over and over again and applying that blessed experiment in every land.”⁷⁹ In Mosul, IS successfully executed a guerilla warfare strategy and rapidly transitioned existing government and municipal infrastructure to maintain control of the city.

3. Guerilla, Auxiliary, and Underground Networks

The three core operational components of an insurgency are the guerillas, auxiliary, and the underground. Each element is made up of indigenous irregular personnel who provide direct or indirect and passive or active support to guerilla warfare, subversion, sabotage, psychological, and information operations as part of the overall coordinated insurgency. Guerillas conduct overt military operations and typically achieve victory over conventional military forces by using speed and surprise. The auxiliary is comprised of members of the population who provide logistical support, information collection, and other activities that fit within their daily patterns of life or routines. The underground is a secretive and compartmentalized organization in a resistance or insurgency that is capable of political maneuvering and special operations in areas where the guerillas are unable to go.⁸⁰

From Mao to Che and al Qaeda to IS, these three components are apparent and consistent. While the structure of the components and tactics used vary across these groups and theorists, each articulates the necessity of armed military wing, a political apparatus, and local bases of support. Guerilla forces, because they execute higher profile military operations, are the most visible and identifiable part of insurgencies. Guerillas are typically patient adversaries that use hit-and-run tactics focusing on enemy weak points and avoid

⁷⁹ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “The Islamic State’s Portrait of Its Current Strategy,” *Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi* (blog), May 15, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/05/the-islamic-state-portrait-of-its-current-strategy>.

⁸⁰ Department of the Army, *Army Techniques Publication No. 3-05.1, Change 1*, 2-16-20.

enemy strengths to mitigate their disadvantages in technology, size, and capability.⁸¹ According to Che, “at the outset, the essential task of the guerilla fighter is to keep himself from being destroyed.”⁸²

Underground and auxiliary elements are also made up of indigenous forces who not only provide logistical and operational support, but, also offer revolutionary movements a political front. In his study of insurgency case studies from the Vietcong to IS, Jones writes that “in insurgent warfare, strategy includes more than just military means, but political and other instruments as well. The political dimension of any campaign is critical to strategy.”⁸³ In UW, a viable political front is critical for mobilizing the population, recruiting local leaders, and developing clear and consistent narratives with which to engage in subversion and propaganda.⁸⁴ Mao may be most famously known for his writings on guerilla warfare; however, for Mao conducting military operations was a means to an end in which his communist movement could eventually be in a position to maximize political opportunities and seize power.⁸⁵

However, there is substantial variation from Mao to modern day revolutionaries, particularly Islamic jihadist groups. Mao’s concept of insurgency was built on indigenous Chinese revolutionaries who were native to China. This was a critical aspect of Mao’s theory for two reasons: 1) a large driver of Mao’s revolution was to eliminate foreign and imperial influence in China and 2) Mao framed his revolution as the people’s revolution, which must be rooted in the local Chinese population. As jihadist organizations, like al Qaeda, have expanded into a global network of franchises, they have relied on international recruitment to fill their ranks, particularly the local guerilla elements. To a large extent this again is a framing issue in which groups like al Qaeda and IS have created narratives of a

⁸¹ Wu Sun, Samuel B. Griffith, and Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *The Art of War*, 29. Aufl, Oxford Paperbacks (London Oxford New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971).

⁸² Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 13.

⁸³ Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare Lessons From the Vietcong to the Islamic State*, 36.

⁸⁴ Jones, 39.

⁸⁵ Thomas Marks, “Mao Tse-Tung and the Search for 21st Century Counterinsurgency,” *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, October 3, 2009, 18, <https://ctc.usma.edu/mao-tse-tung-and-the-search-for-21st-century-counterinsurgency/>.

Muslim in-group writ large for whom it is the duty of all Muslims to engage in jihad to protect the religion against sectarian and foreign enemies. This narrative framing has been successful in drawing foreign recruits to these organization but, more importantly, galvanizing local fighters in the areas where these groups now operate.

D. OPPORTUNITIES

Resistance movement and insurgencies are products of environmental and structural influences. Insurgencies can establish themselves in either rural and/or urban areas; however, each of these environments presents advantages and challenges. Demographics such as ethnic, religious, and social groups are also considerations for insurgent strategies. For insurgents to be successful, the target government must be vulnerable to the effect of insurgent operations and proper timing from individual operations to the design of the overall campaign greatly influence insurgent planning.

1. Environmental

Resistance movements and insurgencies need advantageous environmental and geographic conditions that provide these groups with suitable safe haven and favorable terrain in which to operate. Resistance movements and insurgencies require physical locations for bases of operation and logistics. Typically, mountainous or periphery areas that are ungoverned or outside the reach of the governmental security apparatus are the most desirable locations, but insurgencies can also take root within urban areas where groups enjoy support of the local population and are able to use dense urban terrain or ghettos, where government forces cannot or will not access, as basing locations.⁸⁶

The hallmark of guerilla warfare is its lack of front lines, because “the front is all around, and the rear is nowhere.”⁸⁷ Boundaries do not exist in irregular warfare because “irregular warfare fragments space.”⁸⁸ Central to guerilla warfare is the idea of not allowing the enemy to fight on its own terms. The guerilla fights at the place and time of its choosing.

⁸⁶ Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare Lessons From the Vietcong to the Islamic State*, 37.

⁸⁷ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 87.

⁸⁸ Kalyvas, 88.

After initial defeat by U.S. forces, al Qaeda and the Taliban reassessed their guerilla warfare strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan:

In the face of early American successes, the author [al-Qurashi] turns to Sun Tzu's lesson that an army must never allow the enemy to fight on its own terms and presents the case that America did not win the initial battles; rather, al-Qaeda and the Taliban declined to fight on American terms. So, when the Americans planned to use airpower to destroy al-Qaeda and its allies in Afghan cities, the jihadists withdrew into the countryside, and when the Americans with superior numbers sought to engage them in the countryside, they refused to engage and withdrew into the mountains to prolong the war and wait for the best time and place to counterattack.⁸⁹

2. Political

All warfare is inherently political.⁹⁰ In UW, structural considerations can contribute to the creation of a revolution and play a major role in the success of an UW campaign. Ideally, the target government or regime must be weak and ineffective in order for the resistance movement or insurgency to expand its capabilities and challenge the government. A government able to control infrastructure and the population with an effective intelligence and security organizations is a difficult target. A weak government can also be attributed to the status of its political relationships. Some theorists believe that the political relationships between key groups such as the state and elites, peasants and landlords, groups in conflict over resources, and states competing in the international system drives revolution more so than economic factors.⁹¹ In this regard, it can be argued that "revolutions are not made, they come" as a result of competition and relationships between these groups.⁹²

In Cuba, Castro and Che's foco relied on the strength of its military wing and the failures of the weakened and relatively unsupported Batista government in order to be

⁸⁹ Ryan, *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy*, 98.

⁹⁰ Carl von Clausewitz, Michael Eliot Howard, and Peter Paret, *On War*, First paperback printing (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1989).

⁹¹ Theda Skocpol and Ellen Kay Trimberger, "Revolutions and the World-Historical Development of Capitalism," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 22 (1978 1977): 101-13.

successful.⁹³ In contrast, while the rise of jihadist groups in the Middle East may be considered an “organic crisis of the Arab state,” they would not have grown without significant support from restless, marginalized, and susceptible populations.⁹⁴ The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, de-Baathification, disbanding the Iraqi military, and a post-invasion Shia Muslim dominated government with failing political institutions all contributed to the rise of al Qaeda in Iraq and eventually IS. Additionally, many leaders of jihadist groups spent time in U.S.-run Iraqi prisons such as Camp Bucca, which allowed them to network and created bastions for radicalization and the development of jihadist insurgent theory. Between 2008–2010, in the leadup to the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, U.S. forces released over 20,000 prisoners. This provided IS with an immediate indigenous recruiting pool, many of whom had been radicalized.⁹⁵

3. Timing

Most resistance and insurgent groups go through several phases of development and organization. The Mao construct of popular protracted warfare is commonly used to articulate this concept; however, because revolutionary groups are so varied, it is difficult to put all of them into one model or framework. Timing remains a constant imperative for these groups because action against the target government too soon or too late could ultimately lead to failure. Understanding the conditions within the government, population, environment, and the revolutionary organization are keys to success.⁹⁶

The purpose of a guerilla warfare strategy is to impose costs on an adversary using force but avoid decisive, sustained engagement.⁹⁷ Mao and Sun Tzu agree on the requirements for successful execution of a guerilla warfare strategy such as the need for

⁹³ Moreno, “Che Guevara on Guerrilla Warfare: Doctrine, Practice and Evaluation,” 118–19.

⁹⁴ Gerges, *ISIS*, 223.

⁹⁵ Whiteside, “New Masters of Revolutionary Warfare: The Islamic State Movement (2002-2016),” 13.

⁹⁶ Whiteside uses Mao’s three phase model to examine how the Islamic State has executed a form of revolutionary warfare to achieve its goals. Department of the Army, *Army Techniques Publication No. 3–05.1, Change 1*, 2–6–7; Whiteside, “New Masters of Revolutionary Warfare: The Islamic State Movement (2002-2016).”

⁹⁷ Ivan Arreguin-Toft, “How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict,” *International Security* 26, No. 1 (Summer 2001): 103–4.

speed and careful selection and planning for targets on the adversary's exterior lines, to avoid decisive engagement with an overwhelming enemy force, and at a time when the enemy is unprepared to respond.⁹⁸

4. Demographics

Demographics certainly fit within environmental factors and may play a role in the development of ideology, particularly in-group identity construction and grievances; however, for the purposes of this research, it is worth highlighting demographics as a stand-alone unit of analysis because of the way in which revolutionary groups can co-opt or coerce urban and rural religious and ethnic and nationalist and socio-economic groups to garner support for their activities.

It is clear that popular support is key; however, a critical aspect to successful movements has been the way in which they began. Mao and Lenin's efforts were indigenous in nature. Che, a native Argentinian, was successful in Cuba but only under the overall leadership of a charismatic Cuban, Fidel Castro. Che's attempts to export Communism through Cuban-sponsored unconventional warfare in Congo and Bolivia failed.⁹⁹ These failures were in large part a result of Che's disregard for the political, social, and cultural nuances of those countries.¹⁰⁰ Like Che, IS's initial efforts in Iraq proved to be difficult. Challenges in marketing their religious ideology and the "foreign roots of the organization" allowed established Iraqi Sunni tribes to rally against the early IS movement

⁹⁸ Mao cites six essential requirements for success in the campaign against Japan: "1. Retention of the initiative; alertness; carefully planned tactical attacks in a war of strategical defense; tactical speed in a war strategically protracted, tactical operations on exterior lines in a war conducted strategically on interior lines. 2. Conduct of operations to complement those of the regular army. 3. The establishment of bases. 4. A clear understanding of the relationship that exists between the attack and the defense. 5. The development of mobile operations. 6. Correct command." Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, 96; Sun, Griffith, and Liddell Hart, *The Art of War*.

⁹⁹ Henry Butterfield Ryan, *The Fall of Che Guevara: A Story of Soldiers, Spies, and Diplomats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4.

¹⁰⁰ Ryan, 13.

during the Sahwa.¹⁰¹ When IS changed its leadership in 2007 to known Iraqi jihadists, it refocused IS and provided local authenticity and legitimacy.¹⁰²

Successful UW requires favorable conditions, forward thinking, commitment, and the right opportunities. Figure 1 depicts the relationship between the four critical pillars of UW. The analysis of the following case studies will demonstrate how IS's execution of UW by providing external support to each group directly influenced the groups' ability to; leverage the population, develop organizational control functions, and seize opportunities.

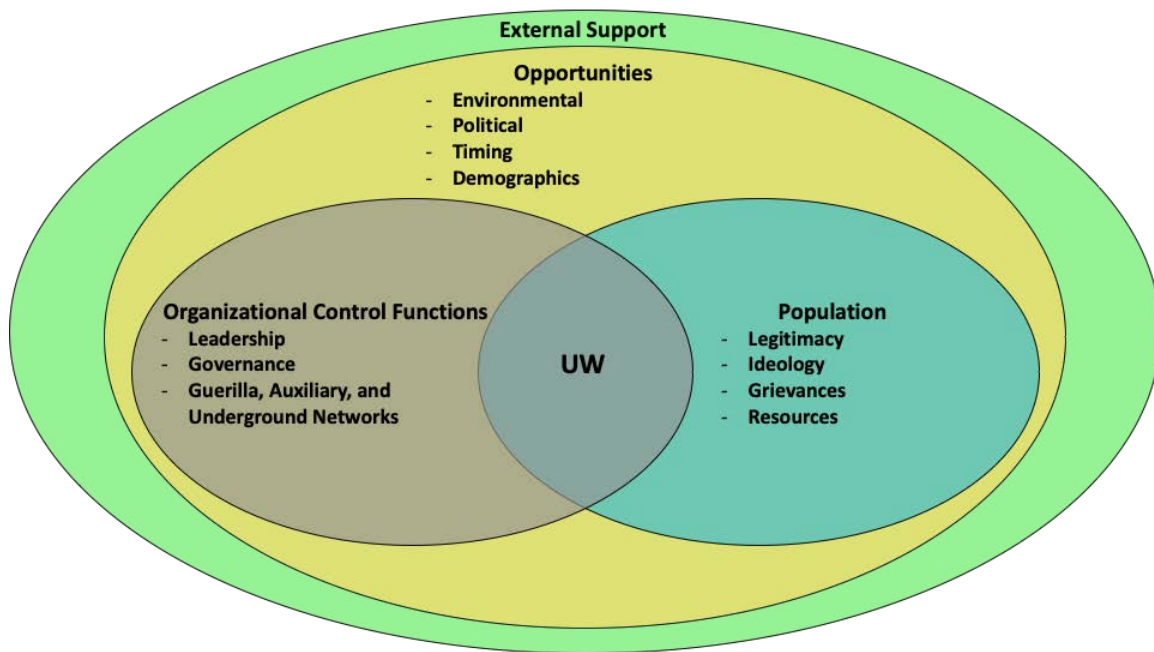


Figure 1. Interconnection of the requisite conditions for successful unconventional warfare

¹⁰¹ Craig Whiteside, "The Islamic State and the Return of Revolutionary Warfare," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (September 2, 2016): 751, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2016.1208287>.

¹⁰² Whiteside, 752.

III. CASE STUDY: JABHAT AL NUSRA

A. OVERVIEW

In 2010, IS was seeing success in its initiatives to mitigate the *Sahwa* (Sunni Awakening) and began redeveloping support of the Sunni Muslim communities in western and northern Iraq.¹⁰³ At the end of 2011, the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq would be complete and IS operations would begin to ramp up.¹⁰⁴ The absence of the U.S. and the inability of Iraqi forces to fill the void in targeting the IS movement, fostered the expansion of a local Sunni support base in Iraq provided the group with room to expand its operations beyond the country it operated in for close to a decade.

In neighboring Syria, a civil war was raging which gave way to the rise of dozens of rebel groups and a blurred line between those waging war in a revolution against the Assad government and opportunistic jihadists capitalizing on the turmoil in Syria. Amid the chaos and volatility of the war, IS saw an opportunity to expand. This would become IS's first UW operation to expand its influence outside of Iraq. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Baghdadi) dispatched a trusted lieutenant and native Syrian, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani (Jolani), with a small contingent of IS personnel from Iraq in August 2011 to connect with well-developed IS networks in Syria, which IS used to support its insurgency in Iraq, and created the IS branch in Syria.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ For an in-depth discussion of the Islamic State's response to the *Sahwa* or more commonly known as the Sunni Awakening, see Whiteside's "Nine Bullets for the Traitors, One for the Enemy: The Slogans and Strategy behind the Islamic State's Campaign to Defeat the Sunni Awakening (2006-2017)." Whiteside, "The Islamic State and the Return of Revolutionary Warfare," 749.

¹⁰⁴ Global Terrorism Database data shows a sharp increase in attacks attributed to from 2010-2012. "GTD Search Iraq Incident Results 2010-2012," Database, Global Terrorism Database, November 6, 2019, https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?start_yearonly=2010&end_yearonly=2012&start_year=&start_month=&start_day=&end_year=&end_month=&end_day=&asmSelect0=&country=95&asmSelect1=&dt2=all&success=yes&casualties_type=b&casualties_max=. Joseph Logan, "Last U.S. Troops Leave Iraq, Ending War," *Reuters*, December 18, 2011, sec. World News, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-withdrawal-idUSTRE7BH03320111218>.

¹⁰⁵ Charles Lister, "Profiling Jabhat Al-Nusra," *Brookings Institution*, The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, 24 (July 2016): 5, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/iwr_20160728_profiling_nusra.pdf.

To some, Jolani's work in Syria from August to October 2011, would be seen as unifying the many smaller and ideologically similar militant groups on the battlefield. Jolani pledged to connect and support rebel groups that had been oppressed and brutalized by the Syrian government. This led to the name Jabhat al Nusra (JN) which translated means "Support Front."¹⁰⁶ JN couched its position as nationalist in support of the fight against the Assad government through the use of jihad to achieve its ends.¹⁰⁷ JN employed a "Syria First" doctrine and embedded in towns and cities fighting alongside opposition groups with various ideologies.¹⁰⁸ As Charles Lister puts it,

Jabhat al Nusra therefore sought to present itself as a hyper-localized jihadist organization that would implement a patient and long-term strategy focused on integrating into local dynamics and in shaping alliances, avoiding enemies, and abstaining from overly swift or extreme implementation of Sharia.¹⁰⁹

JN formally announced its establishment in Syria on January 23, 2012.¹¹⁰ In a video recording, Jolani declared war against the Assad government and Iran, entering a complex Syrian Civil War battlefield.¹¹¹ During 2012, JN would launch a wave of attacks against

¹⁰⁶ Lister, 10.

¹⁰⁷ Lister, 11.

¹⁰⁸ Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and The Evolution of an Insurgency* (Oxford New York Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2015), 65.

¹⁰⁹ Lister, 67.

¹¹⁰ In 2016, JN broke from al Qaeda and assumed the new name of Jabhat Fatah al Sham (HFS). In 2017, HFS assumed control of several smaller jihadist groups and renamed the organization Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS). For the purposes of this research, the organization will be referred to as Jabhat al Nusra or JN because of the time period studied for this thesis. CISAC, "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Formerly Jabhat al-Nusra)," Stanford University Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Mapping Militant Organizations, August 14, 2017, <https://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/493>.

¹¹¹ Lister, "Profiling Jabhat Al-Nusra," 10.

Syrian government targets In less than one year, the United States labeled JN a Foreign Terrorist Organization for its connections to al Qaeda and Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).¹¹²

JN has since broken away from the Islamic State and al Qaeda, rebranded itself as a nationalist revolutionary group, changed its name to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and is considered to be one of the most powerful and successful militant organizations in Syria. JN is commonly written about as a unique Syrian Group without mention of its root within IS; however, the origins of JN and its creation and sponsorship was IS's first use of UW to expand its influence.¹¹³

B. THE POPULATION

1. Legitimacy

IS learned many lessons from its hardships in Iraq. The Sahwa movement took its toll on IS, and, as a result, IS realized that securing the support of a large portion of the population would be essential for future success. JN conducted over 600 attacks against Syrian government targets between November 2011 to December 2012, and in doing so, labeled itself as the protector of Syrian Sunni Muslims from the Syrian government.¹¹⁴ The perception of Sunni protector and nationalist revolutionary group is significant for several reasons: 1) it allowed JN to maximize backing from a broad coalition of armed opposition groups all fighting against the Syrian government which helped JN spread its influence across the country, 2) it allowed JN to leverage popular support from the Syrian people in the areas where it operated which was critical for survival, 3) it began to lay the

¹¹² JN was originally added to the U.S. Department of State list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) in 2012. On May 31, 2018 JN's newest name, Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS) was also added to the list. "The Department of State has amended the designation of al-Nusra Front – an al Qaeda affiliate in Syria – to include Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other aliases. These aliases have been added to al-Nusra Front's designations as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO)." Michael R. Gordon and Anne Barnard, "U.S. Designates Syrian Al Nusra Front as Terrorist Group," *The New York Times*, December 10, 2012, sec. Middle East, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/11/world/middleeast/us-designates-syrian-al-nusra-front-as-terrorist-group.html>; Bill Roggio, "Syrian National Coalition Urges Us to Drop Al Nusrah Terrorism Designation," *Long War Journal*, Threat Matrix, December 12, 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/12/syrian_national_coalition_urge.php.

¹¹³ Shane Harris and Nancy A. Youssef, "Syrian Nusra Front Splits from Al-Qaeda," *The Daily Beast*, July 28, 2016, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/cheats/2016/07/28/syrian-nusra-front-split-from-al-qaeda>.

¹¹⁴ Gerjes, *ISIS*, 182.

groundwork for the sectarian narrative it would soon adopt, and 4) it assisted JN in brand management by “masking its jihadist identity” and links to ISI.¹¹⁵

Over the course of the campaign, JN accumulated several significant victories against Syrian military forces, particularly in major population centers that the Syrian government identified as important for maintaining political control. These victories yielded significant positive and negative effects. Between September 2012–March 2013, JN and its network of alliances took control of territory in notable cities, towns, and border crossings across northern Syria, thereby increasing their legitimacy at the expense of the government.¹¹⁶ Second, JN now had access to a substantial civilian population and additional material resources which it would leverage to spread its jihadist ideology and eventually establish civil administration. While the attacks were successful, their level of violence, civilian collateral damage, and the use of suicide bombers gave rise to some concern among civilians.¹¹⁷

Ostensibly, JN was gaining some trust and support of the population; however, it is likely that JN coerced some of that support.¹¹⁸ JN was capable of conducting state-like activities in areas where the Syrian government was unable or unwilling to control, and demonstrated competence and success in military operations, eliminated or partnered with potential competitors, and administered a legal system and taxation policies.¹¹⁹

2. Ideology

In a British Broadcasting Corporation interview with Abu Lokman, the JN Emir of Aleppo, he described JN by saying “we are Syrian mujahedeen, back from various jihad fronts to restore God’s rule on the Earth and avenge the Syrians’ violated honor and spilled blood.” In this interview, Abu Lokman used JN’s depth of experience on other battlefields

¹¹⁵ Gerges, 182.

¹¹⁶ Lister, “Profiling Jabhat Al-Nusra,” 11.

¹¹⁷ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 119.

¹¹⁸ Abu Lokman, Syria: Islamist Nusra Front Gives BBC Exclusive Interview, interview by Paul Woods, Video, January 17, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-21061018>.

¹¹⁹ Lister, “Profiling Jabhat Al-Nusra,” 30–31.

and the organization's commitment to Islam to highlight its strengths and reasons for its success. JN's identity as a local jihadist group was critical to gain influence with the local population and for build relationships with other organizations. Despite this carefully constructed narrative, JN was a transnational Salafi jihadist group that came into Syria and recruited local fighters, adopted a hyper-local narrative to counter accusations that it was influenced by the global jihad movement and therefore much larger than local communities.¹²⁰ To this point, Gerges emphasizes that Jolani was cautious to reveal JN's connection to IS because many Syrians considered IS far too extreme to mesh with mainstream Syrian norms.¹²¹ A leader within JN confirmed Jolani's intention to mask the link to IS by saying, "this [initially hiding JN's ties to IS] was a plan from Jolani himself. We would show our values, deal with people well, and then after a while we'd tell them, 'The al Qaeda that was smeared in the media? This is it. We are it. What do you think of us...?'"¹²²

3. Grievances

JN's most consistent grievance is that Muslims in Syria (and elsewhere) have strayed from the true path of Islam and that the Assad government is to blame for marginalizing and repressing Syrian Sunnis.¹²³ JN's goal remained to oust Assad from power and install an Islamist government based on the Koran and *sharia* law.¹²⁴ The removal of Assad was a common goal, shared by many of the revolutionary actors and civilian supporters within Syria; and, IS wanted Assad deposed because of his administration's secular and non-Sunni roots. JN effectively used the rifts within Syrian society by "hijacking" existing civilian grievances to secure its foothold among Syrian

¹²⁰ "Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham)" (Counter Extremism Project, September 2019), <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/nusra-front-jabhat-fateh-al-sham>.

¹²¹ Gerges, *ISIS*, 182–83.

¹²² Kyle Orton, "The Riddle of Haji Bakr," *Kyle Orton's Blog* (blog), November 10, 2015, <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2015/11/10/the-riddle-of-haji-bakr/>.

¹²³ Balint Szlanko, "Jabhat Al Nusra's New Syria," *The National*, December 15, 2012, sec. MENA, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/jabhat-al-nusra-s-new-syria-1.364239>.

¹²⁴ Lister, "Profiling Jabhat Al-Nusra," 10.

Muslims.¹²⁵ The Syrian military's violent and heavy-handed actions to suppress protests stemming from the Arab Spring provided JN with justification to target government forces and facilitated their nationalist narratives.¹²⁶

In 2012 it became clear that there was Iranian influence in the Syrian conflict because of the Quds Force military advisors and materiel support to the Syrian military.¹²⁷ JN's nationalist position sought to not only protect Syrian Sunni Muslims from the Assad government but also from foreign intervention, which resulted in JN adding Iran to its list of enemies. Iran's role in the war intensified the sectarian nature of the conflict, which would become increasingly adopt the tones of the regional Sunni versus Shia contest for influence.

4. Resources

JN received startup support from Baghdadi, the emir of ISI, and worked to leverage al Qaeda's financial networks in Syria and the greater Middle East as sources of funding; however, JN quickly needed to establish a robust means of sustaining the organization and operations.¹²⁸ JN increasingly sought to control populations centers for their strategic utility in providing the group with legitimacy but, more importantly, access to resources and the people. While the majority of the Syrian civilian population is located along the Mediterranean coast, a sizeable population lives in the cities and towns along the Euphrates River.¹²⁹

To take control of these resource-rich areas, JN once again partnered with tribes and other opposition groups to seize assets in key locations along the Euphrates River. In addition to being militarily significant, these partnerships also offered JN access to

¹²⁵ US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Al-Nusra Front Leadership in Syria and Militias Supporting the Asad Regime," December 11, 2012, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1797.aspx>.

¹²⁶ Lister, "Profiling Jabhat Al-Nusra," 11.

¹²⁷ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 88.

¹²⁸ Lister, 98.

¹²⁹ CIA, "Middle East: Syria — The World Factbook - Central Intelligence Agency" (Central Intelligence Agency, August 21, 2019), <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>.

additional funding streams from the Gulf nations who supported these groups.¹³⁰ Once under control, JN would use extractive means such as taxes, tariffs, ransoms, and asset seizures to secure financial and materiel support.¹³¹ Additionally, Syria's eastern region contains the majority of Syria's oil and natural gas resources, which provided JN with a major source of revenue to fund its ongoing operations.¹³²

C. ORGANIZATIONAL CONTROL FUNCTIONS

1. Leadership

Choosing Jolani to lead the IS branch in Syria was significant for several reasons and illustrated the importance of the undertaking to Baghdadi. First, Jolani was experienced and fought alongside Zarqawi in the early days of AQL. His reputation as an accomplished jihadist and capable leader would be critical for this task. Second, Jolani was a trusted leader in Iraq in 2011 and the emir of Ninawa Province, a strategic piece of IS territory critical for logistics and funding.¹³³ Lastly and perhaps most important, Jolani was Syrian, which would provide indigenous legitimacy to the operation. IS understood that foreign leadership can be seen as polarizing and dissuade local supporters.¹³⁴ This was particularly critical in Syria as many saw the conflict becoming a proxy war between "Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia on the one hand and Iran, Iraq, and Hezbollah on the other."¹³⁵

2. Governance

Jolani also recognized that effective governmental systems must be ready to function immediately after JN secured territory. To that end, JN opened *al Dawa* (call to

¹³⁰ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 99.

¹³¹ James Badcock, "Spain 'Paid £7m for Release of Journalists Taken Hostage in Syria,'" *The Telegraph*, May 17, 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/17/spain-paid-7m-for-release-of-journalists-taken-hostage-in-syria/>; Christiaan Triebert and Rao Komar, "Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham's Income and Resources," *Hate Speech International*, August 15, 2016, <https://www.hate-speech.org/jabhat-fateh-al-shams-income-and-resources-an-open-source-investigation/>.

¹³² Steven Bernard, Robin Kwong, and Erika Solomon, "Syria Oil Map: The Journey of a Barrel of ISIS Oil," *Financial Times*, February 29, 2016, Online edition, <https://ig.ft.com/sites/2015/isis-oil/>.

¹³³ Geroges, *ISIS*, 183; Lister, "Profiling Jabhat Al-Nusra," 9.

¹³⁴ Whiteside, "The Islamic State and the Return of Revolutionary Warfare," 751.

¹³⁵ Geroges, *ISIS*, 180.

religion) offices to begin religious indoctrination, worked with other militant groups to establish religious courts for settling disputes and prosecuting criminals in the towns and cities it controlled, ensured essential services such as water and electricity, and most importantly, protected the people through security. IS also planned to create institutions for “schools, daycare, the media, and transportation.”¹³⁶ To maximize its influence, JN made skillful use of a media outlet called *al-Manara al-Bayda* (the White Minaret). JN used the media to publicize charitable acts such as the *Qism al-Ighatha* (relief department), which provided resources to the poorest of the population.¹³⁷ JN’s success on the battlefield and in governance immediately provided them with credibility and made them appear to be a legitimate alternative to the Syrian government. In his analysis of JN, Gerges writes “the strategy of al-Nusra and then ISIS has consistently been one of ‘first build and then later leverage influence,’ establishing state-like institutions, providing essential services, and delivering order.”¹³⁸

3. Guerilla, Auxiliary, and Underground Networks

Once in Syria, Jolani and his advance party would recruit and establish dozens of small cells, taking over smaller established rebel groups.¹³⁹ During this time, Jolani received financial support and guidance from Baghdadi in Iraq. Baghdadi’s overarching goal was to support Jolani in order to consolidate control over as much territory as possible.¹⁴⁰

Once militarily in control of terrain, JN deliberately worked to implement durable solutions for effective management of their territory within Syria. JN developed tactics to coerce opponents and eliminate threats, capitalize on internal fissures within the population, and put devoted supporters in key positions within the newly established

¹³⁶ Christoph Reuter, “The Terror Strategist: Secret Files Reveal the Structure of the Islamic State,” *Spiegel Online*, April 18, 2015, sec. World, Islamic State, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-files-show-structure-of-islamist-terror-group-a-1029274.html>.

¹³⁷ Gerges, *ISIS*, 186.

¹³⁸ Gerges, 186.

¹³⁹ Lister, “Profiling Jabhat Al-Nusra,” 10.

¹⁴⁰ Gerges, *ISIS*, 181.

government and civil administration infrastructure.¹⁴¹ The JN plan for consolidation and expansion began during its strategy development. Samir Abd Muhammed al-Khilfawi, commonly known as Haji Bakr, a notorious IS strongman and leader, as well as a former Iraqi Air Defense intelligence officer under Saddam Hussein, traveled to Syria in 2012 to assist JN with establishing the IS branch in Syria. Using the blueprint from the ISI organization, Haji Bakr supervised an in-depth Preparation of the Environment (PE) operation in the areas deemed most critical to IS.¹⁴² Haji Bakr oversaw the recruitment of informants and spies to infiltrate local villages and collect information on powerful families, political and military leaders, and illegal activities.¹⁴³ Haji Bakr's spies also provided IS leadership with information on divisions within the population and atmospherics from civilians that IS could leverage as it established governmental systems. The information gathered "could be used to divide and subjugate the local population."¹⁴⁴ JN orchestrated a campaign of assassinations, kidnapping, and blackmail to set conditions favorable to IS occupation.

JN continued to grow its network of cells and developed formal alliances with adjacent opposition groups from Deir ez Zour, Aleppo, and Damascus. IS was focused particularly on JN infiltrating the rural areas surrounding cities and towns in northern Syria, which would provide it with the support base IS would need to control the urban centers.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ Craig Whiteside, "Nine Bullets for the Traitors, One for the Enemy: The Slogans and Strategy behind the Islamic State's Campaign to Defeat the Sunni Awakening (2016 - 2017)," *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism Studies*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.19165/2018.1.07>.

¹⁴² "Preparation of the Environment or PE is not to be confused with Phase I of U.S. Sponsored Unconventional Warfare, Preparation. PE is a continuous effort to develop networks and infrastructure support a wide of operations." A more detailed discussion of PE can be found in USSOCOM Directive 525-16 (S/NF), *Preparation of the Environment*. Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 3-05.1: Unconventional Warfare*, II-16.

¹⁴³ Reuter, "The Terror Strategist: Secret Files Reveal the Structure of the Islamic State."

¹⁴⁴ Reuter.

¹⁴⁵ Gerges, *ISIS*, 181.

D. OPPORTUNITIES

1. Environmental

Within the chaos of war-torn Syria, JN and IS found opportunity. The civil war provided JN with a natural safe haven among the dozens of opposition and jihadist groups in the country. The government's inability to control the northern and eastern portions of Syria provided JN the opportunity to expand in those locations. Additionally, the already-developed logistic and operational networks ISI used during their insurgency in Iraq created a natural base of operations. Lastly, JN could also leverage the porous border between Syria and Iraq to reach back to ISI and facilitate the movement of personnel, weapons, and supplies.¹⁴⁶

2. Political

IS's decision to move forward with establishing JN was driven by significant political opportunities within Syria. In 2011, the Arab Spring was sweeping across North Africa and the Middle East, which presented pro-democracy advocates in Syria with the opportunity to initiate public demonstrations criticizing the Bashar al Assad government. The Syrian government's violent response to protests and attempts to maintain order within the country, along with disparate economic and social conditions within Syria, drove the country into civil war.¹⁴⁷ In an effort to maintain control and quell the rebellion, the Syrian government was forced to focus military resources in the country's major population centers throughout western Syria, leaving a power vacuum in the northern and eastern regions along the Euphrates River. As the civil war spread across Syria, opposition groups and Islamic organizations began establishing themselves and searching for a place within the conflict. In July 2011, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) began loosely organizing, but a lack of funding, equipment, and experienced fighters led to early hardships for the group. At this time JN was still small but growing in strength behind the credibility of its members

¹⁴⁶ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 56–59.

¹⁴⁷ Aljazeera, "Syria's Civil War Explained from the Beginning," *Aljazeera Online*, April 14, 2018, sec. Middle East News, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-civil-war-explained-160505084119966.html>.

through their combat experience during the war in Iraq, and its sources of external support from ISI.

In December 2011, JN initiated its guerilla warfare strategy by conducting its first claimed attack in Damascus using two suicide bombers against a Syrian Army Intelligence building. In early 2012, JN conducted two more attacks against Syrian government targets in Damascus and Aleppo.¹⁴⁸ The results of JN's early attacks were mixed; however, their effectiveness and messaging provided JN with credibility among other jihadists who now saw JN as being one of the more organized groups on the battlefield. This organizational capacity combined with JN's military prowess would prove to be their greatest asset and most significant recruiting tool.

3. Timing

IS's timing of their expansion to Syria opportunistically coincided with the Arab Spring and the onset of the Syrian Civil War. Within a few years of expansion IS initiatives and JN's operations were successful. By 2013, JN was seen as one the most, if not the most, powerful armed groups in Syria.¹⁴⁹ JN transitioned to direct operations against the Syrian government and from February to March 2013, JN and its allies achieved strategic victories in Aleppo, Idlib, Raqqa, and Hasakah while maintaining operations in Hama Province using professional military tactics, combined arms maneuver, and fire support.¹⁵⁰ Additionally, JN controlled several key border crossing points from Syria to Turkey, which

¹⁴⁸ There are mixed reports regarding when JN conducted its first attack. Lister cites that the December 2011 attack was the first claimed attack however he acknowledges that there are other reports of JN attacks in November 2011. In his citing of total JN attacks from 2011–2012, Gerges uses November 2011 as the starting point, the same date used by the U.S. Department of State when they first added JN to the list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 51–63.

¹⁴⁹ Wassim Nasr, "Jabhat Al-Nusra Releases Videos of Its Deadliest Attacks in Syria," *The France 24 Observers*, February 22, 2013, <https://observers.france24.com/en/20130222-jabhat-al-nusra-front-video-deadliest-attacks-syria>.

¹⁵⁰ The U.S. Army Maneuver Center of Excellence (MCoE) explains combined arms maneuver as the combination of ground forces, mobile firepower, offensive and defensive fires, and engineers. The simultaneous application of these capabilities in unified action allows the attacking forces; "to seize, occupy, and defend land areas; and to achieve physical, temporal, and psychological advantages over the enemy." Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 110–12; Department of Defense, "Combined Arms Operations," U.S. Army Maneuver Center of Excellence (MCoE), December 18, 2018, <https://www.benning.army.mil/mssp/Combined%20Arms%20Operations/>.

would allow JN to receive logistical support and foreign fighters. JN had an active presence in eleven of Syria's thirteen provinces.¹⁵¹

4. Demographics

JN was clearly a Sunni organization that leveraged the Sunni Muslim majority in Syria and developed narratives consistent with local grievances and promoted stability within the Sunni community to secure support. The Syrian Civil War devolved into a sectarian conflict which pitted Sunni Muslims against Shia Muslims and Bashar al Assad's Alawite sect, further driving supporters toward groups like JN for protection.

E. ANALYSIS

IS's sponsorship of JN was its first UW operation to expand its influence outside of Iraq. Syria was a natural choice for IS expansion for several reasons. First, proximity to Iraq and access through the porous border facilitated the IS expansion. IS also had deep ties to logistic and operational networks within the country networks established during the U.S. occupation of Iraq made Syrian resource pools available to the group. Second, the under-governed free spaces in eastern Syria provided IS with a safe haven and the opportunity to exploit the lack of Syrian government presence in the area. Third, the Syrian Revolution created a susceptible and unsecure civilian Sunni population with sufficient grievances that IS would co-opt. IS recognized that skillfully framing their narratives and shaping their ideological in-group messaging would allow them to bring together dozens of disorganized militant groups already seeking direction. This provided IS with increased military capability, mobilized additional resources, and gave the group grassroots legitimacy.

IS chose a capable leader in Jolani to lead its expansion. Jolani was capable in two major ways: 1) he was a native Syrian which made the JN ideology and narratives appear to be organically Syrian, 2) he possessed intangible leadership resources which he used to successfully develop a robust organization. Jolani's leadership had a major impact on how IS approached future UW campaigns. As we will see in later case studies, IS learned that

¹⁵¹ Gerges, *ISIS*, 187.

it must take a more active role in controlling the leadership of its franchises, in order to avoid ideological and operational splits, like what occurred with JN.

IS was able to capitalize on the effort and resources spent in Syria. IS still controlled a large portion of northeastern Syria for four years, maintained a capital city in Raqqa, and extracted significant resources from the Syrian population under its control. While it has rebranded the organization and cut overt ties to al Qaeda, JN (now HTS) remains a highly effective jihadist group in Syria. Its military competence and success on the battlefield, professionalism of the organization, and implementation of effective public administration distinguished JN from its competitors.

The experience with JN provided IS with several lessons learned. First, the insurgency doctrine that IS developed in Iraq was validated and improved by its effectiveness in Syria. The model of establishing intelligence and support networks, infiltrating groups, isolating population centers by controlling the surrounding countryside, then taking over the city through siege-like tactics and attritional warfare worked and is still the bedrock of IS doctrine today.¹⁵² Additionally, the use of religious education centers to indoctrinate civilians, special police to maintain control over the population, and governance were all effective practices.¹⁵³ Second, while IS was proficient at insurgency and guerilla warfare from its time spent fighting in Iraq, managing the insurgency from afar proved to be a difficult undertaking. JN shifted from the IS ideological and operational goals of establishing an Islamic caliphate to becoming a nationalist organization. This change in ideology and narrative framing allowed JN to mobilize Syrian resources, increase its popular support base, and gain credibility.

A detailed discussion of the split between JN and IS exceeds the scope of this research; however, there are some salient points to highlight that also show the level of IS senior leadership involved in this expansion. First, IS lost organizational capability once JN split as some of the most competent and experienced Syrian members left with Jolani. Second, IS saw how effective JN's model was and likely adjusted its own model of

¹⁵² al-Tamimi and Winter, "ISIS Relaunches as a Global Platform."

¹⁵³ Zelin, "The Islamic State's Territorial Methodology."

expansion to reflect those lessons learned. Third, as JN became more popular and successful, Baghdadi began to realize that JN was growing outside of ISI's ability to control and recognized the need to develop a contingency plan in order to maintain the group's foothold in Syria. Baghdadi sent Haji Bakr and his team of spies to observe Jolani and JN's activities in an attempt to steer the group back into the ISI fold. When that failed, Baghdadi himself traveled to Syria and tried to change Jolani's ways; but, this too was unsuccessful. In the end, JN rejected ISI and Baghdadi, and pledged allegiance to al Qaeda. In response, Baghdadi executed his contingency plan which resulted in groups throughout Homs and Aleppo, once loyal to JN, defecting to IS and gave the group control of key areas it would later use to establish its caliphate.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Orton, "The Riddle of Haji Bakr."

IV. CASE STUDY: ISLAMIC STATE—KHORASAN PROVINCE

A. OVERVIEW

IS did what few thought was possible, it established a caliphate and was in control of a significant amount of terrain, infrastructure, and civilian population centers in Iraq and Syria, for several years. As a result the world shifted its focus in shock and IS shifted its sights toward central Asia in a deliberate attempt to expand into what IS leadership considered “a favorable environment.”¹⁵⁵ Whispers of IS operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan (AF/PAK) began in 2014, but, to a great extent, were written off as false or merely an example of the band wagon effect of smaller insurgent groups in Afghanistan seeking to ride the coat tails of IS. It was not until two years later that Coalition forces in Afghanistan publicly acknowledged that Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-K) had “financial, strategic, and communications connections” to the Islamic State.¹⁵⁶

Leaders within the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban had sent over 1,000 fighters from their organizations to Syria.¹⁵⁷ The success of IS on the battlefield, its financial solvency, and dedication to its Salafist ideology became more and more attractive to Afghan and Pakistani fighters who feared their organizations would eventually agree to peace treaties with their governments.¹⁵⁸ IS began recruiting and mobilizing networks in central Asia, which resulted in several militant groups and defectors from the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban to pledge allegiance to Baghdadi and form the group that would become IS-K. In January 2015, IS spokesman Abu Muhammed al-Adnani officially announced the creation

¹⁵⁵ Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 207.

¹⁵⁶ Rebecca Kheel, “Top U.S. General: ISIS in Afghanistan Connected to Core Group,” *The Hill*, July 27, 2016, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/289445-top-us-general-isis-in-afghanistan-connected-to-core-group>.

¹⁵⁷ The Australian, “IS Growing in Pakistan, Afghanistan,” *The Australian*, November 2, 2014, On-Line edition, sec. World, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/world/islamic-state-influence-is-growing-in-pakistan-and-afghanistan/news-story/77b49fc82423fb656ece206d889b0f6d>.

¹⁵⁸ Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 24.

of IS-K.¹⁵⁹ Initially, IS-K and the Taliban had a non-hostile relationship; however, that changed, and IS-K added the Taliban to its list of enemies in the region.

In the summer of 2015, IS-K would see initial success in Nangarhar and southern Helmand Province.¹⁶⁰ These victories appeared to be similar to the large advances IS had become famous for in Iraq and Syria. By the middle of 2016, Iranian, Afghan, and Pakistani intelligence reports indicated that IS-K was active in one-third of Afghanistan's thirty-four provinces.¹⁶¹ Following its early success, IS-K experienced operational setbacks as a result of a high rate of leadership turnover resulting from the successful barrage of counterattacks by local militias, Coalition air strikes, and Taliban forces.¹⁶² However, IS-K remains a threat in Afghanistan with approximately 2,500-3,000 fighters in the country. In a February 2019 interview with General Joseph Votel, the former U.S. Central Command Commander, he stated that "[IS-K] represent a very sophisticated and dangerous threat that we have to stay focused on."¹⁶³ According to the current Afghanistan Ambassador to the United States, the IS-K threat has not yet eclipsed the Taliban but it is growing.¹⁶⁴

B. THE POPULATION

1. Legitimacy

The creation of IS-K would be a major undertaking for IS-Central in an area of the world much different from where it was comfortable operating.¹⁶⁵ Even before news of the Islamic State's successes in Iraq and Syria reached an international audience, IS-Central

¹⁵⁹ Giustozzi, 31.

¹⁶⁰ Casey Garret Johnson, "The Rise and Stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan," *United States Institute of Peace*, no. 395 (November 2016): 16.

¹⁶¹ Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 140–41.

¹⁶² Giustozzi, 4.

¹⁶³ Barbara Starr and Ryan Browne, "US Officials Warn ISIS' Afghanistan Branch Poses a Major Threat," *CNN*, February 19, 2019, Online edition, sec. Politics, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/19/politics/isis-afghanistan-threat/index.html>.

¹⁶⁴ Kelly Magsamen, A Look At The ISIS Presence In Afghanistan, interview by Mary Louise Kelly, August 20, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/20/752882671/a-look-at-the-isis-presence-in-afghanistan>.

¹⁶⁵ I will use IS-Central to delineate between the senior level leadership and main component of the Islamic State from IS-K and other affiliates, franchise, branches, or *wilayats*.

was already pursuing and attracting recruits from Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹⁶⁶ The AF/PAK revolutionary landscape was already crowded with established jihadist groups, many of whom were supported by external actors with varied ideological and state interests. To gain legitimacy in the region, IS-K sought to promote the IS-Central narrative of being the preeminent and most professional salafi jihadist organization in the world and the sole protector of Sunni Muslims.¹⁶⁷ Through propaganda and messaging across various mediums and published in the languages organic to the region, IS-K called for all jihadist groups in Khorasan to join the Islamic State, highlighting the theological necessity to establish an Islamic caliphate.¹⁶⁸

To solidify its legitimacy, IS-K referenced fatwas issued by Ibn Taymiyya in the 13th century, who urged Muslims to fight back against the Mongols attacking Muslim areas.¹⁶⁹ IS-K used historical precedent to justify its violence against Muslims and other ethnic groups. Additionally, IS-K framed its presence in AF/PAK as carrying on the jihad against foreign influences in the region, likening itself to Afghan historical heroes: the Afghan mujahedeen who fought against the Soviet Union and, more recently, the United States.¹⁷⁰ This was part of IS-K's efforts to frame the Taliban as a nationalist, rather than Islamic group, and a puppet organization controlled by Pakistan.

2. Ideology

Ideologically, IS-K does not differ significantly from its parent organization, although, as we will discuss later, IS-K's alleged financial sponsorship by some Arab gulf states influenced changes in the way it behaves.¹⁷¹ IS-Central sponsorship of IS-K fits its

¹⁶⁶ Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 23.

¹⁶⁷ Gerges, *ISIS*, 219.

¹⁶⁸ Borhan Osman, "ISKP's Battle for Minds: What Are Their Main Messages and Who Do They Attract?" (Afghanistan Analysts Network, December 12, 2016), <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/iskps-battle-for-minds-what-are-their-main-messages-and-who-do-they-attract/>.

¹⁶⁹ At this time, the Mongols were Muslim converts however, Taymiyya labeled them apostates because their practice of Islam was unorthodox and, as such, considered takfir. Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 7; Tom Heneghan, "Muslim Scholars Recast Jihadists' Favorite Fatwa," *Reuters*, March 31, 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-islam-fatwa-violence-idUSTRE62U0VU20100331>.

¹⁷⁰ Osman, "ISKP's Battle for Minds."

¹⁷¹ Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 37–38.

self-proclaimed global role and extending into AF/PAK lends credence to the IS claim of establishing a global caliphate.¹⁷² IS presence on the western and eastern borders of Iran signals resolve and capability to its Iranian enemies. Expansion also serves as a primary means of distinguishing the Islamic State from its primary competitors in the region, the Taliban and al Qaeda. IS consistently frames the Taliban as narrowly focused on Afghanistan with no aspirations to further Islam's position in the world. Moreover, IS-K claims that the Taliban are a nationalist group and questions the Islamic character of the Taliban as an organization. IS-K also highlights that rather than rule strictly by Sharia law, the Taliban has diluted their rules and laws to cater to tribal customs and tradition, a substantial divergence from IS-K which remains staunch adherents to and proponents of Sharia.¹⁷³ Despite the rhetoric, IS-K has shown that it is capable of being pragmatic at times. As we will discuss later, IS-K has been willing to temporarily relax some of its ideological constraints in order to gain favor and support from the population.¹⁷⁴

IS-K's and IS-Central's ideologies shaped clear in and out groups. In the case of IS-K, the in group remains the cooperative Sunni Muslim *ummah*.¹⁷⁵ In Khorasan, there are three major out-groups: 1) the Afghan and Pakistani governments which IS-K believe to be western-backed, secular, puppet regimes, 2) Shias and other Muslim minorities, Iran and its proxies in the region, and 3) the Taliban, other jihadist organizations operating in the region, and individuals that refuse to pledge allegiance to IS.

3. Grievances

IS-K has effectively co-opted local grievances within AF/PAK, particularly among disenfranchised members of the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban. The IS-K and, more

¹⁷² Giustozzi, 7.

¹⁷³ Sarah Ashraf, "ISIS Khorasan: Presence and Potential in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Region" (The Henry Jackson Society, October 18, 2017), 12, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/isis-khorasan-presence-and-potential-in-the-afghanistan-pakistan-region/>.

¹⁷⁴ Rivka Azoulay, "Islamic State Franchising: Tribes, Transnational Jihadi Networks and Generational Shifts," CRU Report, The Sahel Programme (Netherlands: Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, April 2015), https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Rivka-Azoulay_Islamic_State_expansion_CRU_April2015.pdf. Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 212.

¹⁷⁵ Arabic word meaning "community."

broadly, the IS-Central global jihad narrative resonates with fighters in AF/PAK that have witnessed their organizations struggle to achieve their stated goals with their region. As previously mentioned, many of these jihadists see the biggest threat to their movement and livelihood as a negotiated settlement with the Afghan government. IS-K is also appealing to more uncompromising jihadists who believe that seeking jihad globally is their duty and a positive evolution of the Islamic movement.¹⁷⁶ A growing number of hardline jihadists within the Taliban felt that the organization was under the control of the Pakistani intelligence service, ISI, and, as a result, could not spread jihad to other countries in the region. The Taliban's organizational nature of being more tribally aligned and driven by tribal disputes also discouraged some members. To some Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, the "Arab character" (the way that IS-K was committed to Islam and the idea of a global jihad) of IS-K was genuine and naturally attractive as it set the organization apart from its peers.¹⁷⁷ Iran's involvement fighting against IS-Central in Iraq and Syria and its support to militant groups within Afghanistan has placed it high on the list of enemies for IS-K. In fact, the IS-K mandate specifically emphasizes retaliation against Iranian and Russian interests in Khorasan.¹⁷⁸

4. Resources

IS-K received external support from IS-Central, but also received financial and materiel resources from outside donors. In 2015, IS-K ordered all of the new groups it had enrolled underneath the IS-K umbrella to stop directly accepting third party funding; however, some evidence suggests IS-K, along with its sub-groups, received funding from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Pakistan.¹⁷⁹ IS-K also successfully leveraged existing mosque,

¹⁷⁶ Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 24; Ashraf, "ISIS Khorasan: Presence and Potential in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Region," 19.

¹⁷⁷ Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 123.

¹⁷⁸ Giustozzi, 49.

¹⁷⁹ Giustozzi, 113–14.

madrassa (school), and charity networks within the AF/PAK border regions to secure logistical and financial support.¹⁸⁰

Similar to IS-Central, in areas under its control, IS-K was capable of extracting significant resources from the population through the taxation of goods and materials consistent with Islamic law such as livestock, agricultural, precious metals, and wood.¹⁸¹ Although growing and harvesting poppy, is considered illegal, IS-K's on and off taxation of the drug trade represents another instance of IS-K's opportunistic nature and pragmatism with respect to local culture and tradition.¹⁸² IS-K also considers Nangahar's relatively open border between Afghanistan and Pakistan as critical for revenue streams from smuggling, human trafficking, and kidnapping.¹⁸³ Lastly, IS-K sought to control terrain in areas rich in natural resources where it could control and monetize the mining of rare stones and minerals.

C. ORGANIZATIONAL CONTROL FUNCTIONS.

1. Leadership

IS-K leadership has been predominantly Pakistani. At the time of IS-K's inception, Hafiz Saeed Khan was chosen by Baghdadi to serve as the Governor of Khorasan and leader of the group.¹⁸⁴ Khan was a Pakistani jihadist from Orakzai Agency in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and formerly the leader of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).¹⁸⁵ Khan was killed in a U.S. drone strike in July 2016.¹⁸⁶ Maintaining continuity of leadership in IS-K was a difficult task. Several of the subsequent leaders were targeted by

¹⁸⁰ Katja Mielke and Nick Miszak, "Making Sense of Daesh in Afghanistan: A Social Movement Perspective" (Bonn International Center for Conversion & The Liaison Office, June 2017), https://www.bicc.de/uploads/tx_bicctools/BICC_Working_Paper_6_2017.pdf.

¹⁸¹ Mielke and Miszak.

¹⁸² Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 35, 215.

¹⁸³ Johnson, "The Rise and Stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan."

¹⁸⁴ Ashraf, "ISIS Khorasan: Presence and Potential in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Region," 4.

¹⁸⁵ Johnson, "The Rise and Stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan."

¹⁸⁶ Reuters, "ISIS's Leader in Pakistan and Afghanistan Killed in Us Drone Strike," *The Guardian*, August 12, 2016, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/12/isis-leader-pakistan-afghanistan-hafiz-saeed-khan-killed>.

Coalition forces and killed. Additionally, rifts between the Pakistani and Afghan leaders within IS-K proved to become problematic in terms of the operational focus and direction of the group.¹⁸⁷ It appeared that differences of opinions and beliefs between the Pakistani and Afghan leadership resulted in IS-K struggling to create a consistent, coordinated effort across both countries.¹⁸⁸

According to interviews of IS-K personnel conducted by Antonio Giustozzi and his research staff, to ensure IS-K was developing in line with the intent of IS-Central, the parent organization took several steps to oversee its establishment. First, IS-Central retained final approval for changes to laws, rules, and leadership. IS-Central authorized IS-K to make tactical and administrative decisions about military operations, recruitment, and financing without seeking approval from IS-Central. Second, IS-Central appointed a “Special Representative” to IS-K to speak for IS-Central, serve as a liaison, and verify that IS guidelines and instructions were being followed. Third, IS-Central implemented an auditing system by conducting nearly quarterly inspections of IS-K finances and operations.¹⁸⁹ Lastly, single source reporting indicated that IS-Central committed a significant amount of human resources to IS-K in the form of operational advisors and, in mid-2015, sent a large contingent of military advisers to assist with indoctrination and training of IS-K officers.¹⁹⁰

2. Governance

IS-K has been most active in four regional pockets of Afghanistan. In the east, their strongest area, IS-K has been operating in Nangarhar, Kunar, and Nuristan provinces. Each of these provinces shares a border with Pakistan which, as previously noted, allows IS-K to leverage cross-border operational and logistical networks. In the northeast, IS-K has been present in Kunduz, Takhar, and Badakhshan. IS-K activity has also been seen in

¹⁸⁷ Johnson, “The Rise and Stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan,” 2.

¹⁸⁸ Mielke and Miszak, “Making Sense of Daesh in Afghanistan: A Social Movement Perspective.”

¹⁸⁹ Giustozzi, 25–50.

¹⁹⁰ Giustozzi, 209.

the western provinces of Herat and Farrah and to the north in Jawzjan, Faryab, and Sar-e Pul.¹⁹¹

While IS-K remains active in the above-mentioned areas, their control of territory through civil administration and bureaucratic systems has been inconsistent. Southern Nangarhar Province is their most successful attempt at implementation of governance in line with the IS-Central model. In parts of Nangarhar, IS-K built a system of taxation, courts, prisons, and other governmental agencies servicing security and educational requirements. The greatest differences between IS-K and IS-Central's ability to implement governance is IS-K's lack of organizational capacity and the nature of the terrain.¹⁹² In Iraq and Syria, IS-Central leveraged the intangible resources of members who had practical experience within government. Additionally, Iraq and Syria are relatively well-connected by lines of communication with larger population centers. Afghanistan, on the other hand, is expansive with smaller communities and villages separated by great distances and difficult terrain.

IS-K has enjoyed greatest support in areas where the population leans Salafist and the local forces loyal to IS-K have been in control for a substantial period of time.¹⁹³ However, in areas where IS-K has found it difficult to secure willing cooperation of the population and tribal or village leadership, the group has consistently shown willingness to conduct violent attacks and use coercive policies. Kidnappings, assassinations, and intimidation have been effective tools for controlling the population but also in deterring interference from other groups.¹⁹⁴ Generally IS-K has continued the IS-Central model of divide and rule using violence and sectarianism to keep constituents in line and remain relevant as a source of security.

IS-K also attempted to make in-roads with tribal elders and the local *mullahs* (Islamic scholars and theologians). While reporting is mixed on the success of these

¹⁹¹ Mielke and Miszak, "Making Sense of Daesh in Afghanistan: A Social Movement Perspective," 19.

¹⁹² Mielke and Miszak, 20.

¹⁹³ Mielke and Miszak, 22–23.

¹⁹⁴ Mielke and Miszak, 21.

endeavors, IS-K had success building relationships with other Salafists in parts of Nangahar and Kunar Provinces. In other locations, IS-K used intimidation, coercion, and assassination to obtain local support.¹⁹⁵ IS-K would also have to adapt its ideology and rules to fit within decades of established norms. The most apparent example of this was IS-K's decision to temporarily suspend the ban on opium production and drug smuggling. In November 2015, the IS-Central Special Representative to IS-K, Abu Yasir al-Afghani, implemented a strict ban on growing poppy and the taxation of the drug trade because drugs are prohibited by Islam.¹⁹⁶ There were rumors that IS-K continued to allow drugs to move through their territory in order to collect taxes on the products but, publicly IS-K took a hard line on drugs. This was similar to the way in which IS-Central levied taxes on drug smuggling in Iraq and Syria.¹⁹⁷ However, in 2017 the opium ban was suspended in parts of Afghanistan and Baluchistan. This was likely a political move to appeal to the tribal elders for tacit support and portray IS-K as understanding of local culture. It also provided IS-K access to additional tax revenue.¹⁹⁸

3. Guerilla, Auxiliary, and Underground Networks

As a relatively foreign organization, IS-K had to rely on already established networks, made by other jihadist organizations, for recruitment, sustainment, and information. IS-K would also grow its guerilla forces from the ranks of already recognized jihadist groups. IS-Central began laying the ground work for expansion to the region as early as 2013 by courting Pakistani and Afghan groups to support IS-Central in Iraq and Syria, and would later leverage those relationships to begin expansion in central Asia.¹⁹⁹ IS-Central reportedly sent \$42 million to the Haqqani Network in order to maintain a good working relationship and facilitate IS-K expansion. IS-K also allegedly offered leaders of the Pakistani elements fighting in Syria \$1 million to begin recruiting once they returned

¹⁹⁵ Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 133–38, 183.

¹⁹⁶ Giustozzi, 161–65.

¹⁹⁷ Patrick Blannin, "Islamic State's Financing," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 9, no. 5 (2017): 17.

¹⁹⁸ Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 216.

¹⁹⁹ Giustozzi, 23.

home.²⁰⁰ Once on the ground, in 2014, IS-K began forming around three main Afghan jihadist groups: Tehrik-e Khilafat Khorasan, Khilafat Afghan, and the Azizullah Haqqani Group. In Pakistan, Tehrik-e Khilafat Pakistan was the primary cohesive force for IS-K.²⁰¹

IS-K operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan show distinct variation. Giustozzi explains that in Afghanistan “IS-K adopted a mixed approach: small groups spread around to mostly do recruitment, and a few strongholds where IS-K could build up its army.”²⁰² The IS-K stronghold concept consisted of IS-K establishing temporary, hidden bases throughout Afghanistan, occupied by small “underground” teams which would then travel to make contact with the Taliban as well as tribal and village elders to set conditions for IS-K future operations.²⁰³ Operationally, IS-K conducted guerilla warfare to secure the territory under its control. IS-K also used underground elements to target local security forces, government infrastructure, and the military through the employment of suicide bombers. From 2014–2018, data on IS-K kinetic operations in Afghanistan shows that 47% of IS-K suicide attacks targeted the state.²⁰⁴ Additionally, the group has become exponentially more lethal through the increased effectiveness of its operations. In 2015, IS-K suicide attacks resulted in 90 deaths; in 2017, that number grew to 688.²⁰⁵ IS-K conducted over 200 kinetic operations in Afghanistan from 2014–2018, resulting in over 1,500 deaths.²⁰⁶

IS-K operations in Pakistan were different. In early 2015, IS-K was transferring money to Pakistan via the hawala system which it would use to bolster recruiting efforts

²⁰⁰ Giustozzi, 23, 25–26.

²⁰¹ Giustozzi, 27–30.

²⁰² Giustozzi, 42.

²⁰³ Michael R. Gordon, “ISIS Building ‘Little Nests’ in Afghanistan, U.S. Defense Secretary Warns,” *The New York Times*, December 18, 2015, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/19/world/asia/afghanistan-ash-carter.html>; Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 41.

²⁰⁴ Amira Jadoon, “Allied & Lethal: Islamic State Khorasan’s Network and Organizational Capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, December 2018, 3, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/12/Allied-Lethal.pdf>.

²⁰⁵ Jadoon, 21.

²⁰⁶ Jadoon, 11.

and logistics.²⁰⁷ At that time, IS-K conducted limited attacks against the government and focused most of its efforts on Shia targets in the northwestern portion of the country. While Pakistani members of IS-K desired to attack the state, a functioning government and security apparatus along with an almost cooperative relationship between IS-K and the Pakistani ISI, made kinetic operations challenging. In late 2016, as tensions with the Pakistani ISI grew, IS-K began ramping up attacks against government and civilian targets. Giustiozzi explains that:

By early 2017 a source in TKP [Tehrik-e Khilafat Pakistan] pointed out that IS-K was making progress in building a presence in Pakistan's main cities, with about 1,200 members in Peshawar, 700 in Lahore, 240 in Islamabad and 750 in Quetta; at least 40 percent of its members in Pakistani territory were in cities at that point.²⁰⁸

IS-K in Pakistan was certainly lethal but on a much smaller scale. From 2014–2018 IS-K conducted 83 total attacks, of which 62% targeted the government, police, or military, and 18 of the 83 attacks were by suicide bombers. The total number of fatalities for the attacks within Pakistan was 706.²⁰⁹

There were also indications of IS-Central's involvement in developing IS-K's media and propaganda bureau. In his analysis of captured IS-K media products, Daniel Milton explains that the materials were not specific to Afghanistan, but general information and training materials that applied to all of the IS enterprise. Analysis of these products and IS-Central's media guidance, yielded that there was a direct link between IS-K's media outlet and *Amaq*, an IS-Central unofficial or gray news agency, as well as the IS-Central leadership, which provided quality control and evaluation of media products. IS-Central required that media products and propaganda messages be approved by IS-Central before their release in order to maintain a common narrative and consistent message throughout the organization and its branches. Milton went on to write the fact that these "documents

²⁰⁷ The *hawala* system a way of transferring money across borders. It is primarily used in many regions of the Middle East and South Asia, because of the under-developed banking infrastructure in those areas. It is also used by diaspora communities around the world.

²⁰⁸ Giustiozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 60–61.

²⁰⁹ Jadoon, "Allied & Lethal: Islamic State Khorasan's Network and Organizational Capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan," 3, 12.

were recovered during an operation targeting a senior Islamic State-Khorasan media official increases their value and supports the assumption that these documents were actively being utilized to shape the group's media operations.”²¹⁰

D. OPPORTUNITIES

1. Environmental

Afghanistan has a long history of being the prototypical insurgent safe haven. Known as the “Graveyard of Empires,” history has proven that Afghanistan can be difficult to govern, control, and understand; all of these were contributing factors toward IS-Central's decision to expand into the country.²¹¹ Afghanistan was a logical staging point IS-K to begin operations in central Asia because the mountainous terrain provided IS-K with protection and Afghanistan's central location within the region, provided IS-K, with access to the rest of Central Asia. IS-K chose Nangahar Province in eastern Afghanistan as its main basing location because of its proximity to the FATA in Pakistan, where IS-K has enjoyed freedom of maneuver, and mountainous terrain, which was outside the daily reach of Afghan security forces and generally ungoverned.²¹² As Jadoon explains:

The porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan can offer ISK an opportunity to exploit safe havens in ungoverned areas on both sides of the border as well as any seasonal dynamics. This means that any aggressive state-led actions on one side of the border can result in the dispersion of ISK militants rather than their elimination. Finally, a presence on both sides of the border offers greater opportunities to ISK to diversify its resources, benefit from cross-border smuggling, and set up a financial infrastructure in the broader shadow economy of the region.²¹³

²¹⁰ Daniel Milton, “Pulling Back the Curtain: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Media Organization,” *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, August 28, 2018, 1, <https://ctc.usma.edu/pulling-back-the-curtain-an-inside-look-at-the-islamic-states-media-organization/>.

²¹¹ Akhilesh Pillalamarri, “Why Is Afghanistan the ‘Graveyard of Empires’?,” *The Diplomat*, June 30, 2017, Online edition, sec. Crossroads Asia, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/06/why-is-afghanistan-the-graveyard-of-empires/>.

²¹² Ashraf, “ISIS Khorasan: Presence and Potential in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Region,” 13.

²¹³ Jadoon, “Allied & Lethal: Islamic State Khorasan's Network and Organizational Capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” 62.

AF/PAK, but more specifically Afghanistan, was chosen as an appropriate location to host and provide refuge for IS-Central leadership as they were forced to flee Iraq and Syria.²¹⁴ In IS-K's grand strategy, Afghanistan is the primary operational area with the most advantageous safe haven locations. Pakistan, however, serves as the IS-K logistical base of operations.²¹⁵

2. Political

Afghanistan was chosen as the footing for IS-K, because it is the weakest state in the region, with an ongoing armed conflict, and strategically located.²¹⁶ However, perhaps the most substantial political opportunities exploited by IS-Central and IS-K were the internal fractures and rifts within the Taliban.²¹⁷ Initially, IS-K had an amenable relationship with the Taliban. Seen as a relatively low threat, the Taliban tolerated IS-K and, in some cases, agreed to non-belligerence pacts with the group.²¹⁸

The Taliban's renewed relationship with Iran, the increasing threat of IS-K, ideological differences, and competition for resources put the two organizations at odds.²¹⁹ IS-K's strategic, albeit lofty, goal was to replace the Taliban and co-opt other insurgent organizations into a salafist jihad regional conglomerate.²²⁰ Frustration among AF/PAK Taliban commanders and soldiers, particularly those who had fought in Iraq and Syria, gave IS-K the right opportunity to move into the region.²²¹

²¹⁴ Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 42–44.

²¹⁵ Giustozzi, 47.

²¹⁶ Giustozzi, 41–42.

²¹⁷ Mielke and Miszak, "Making Sense of Daesh in Afghanistan: A Social Movement Perspective," 52.

²¹⁸ Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 189.

²¹⁹ Mielke and Miszak, "Making Sense of Daesh in Afghanistan: A Social Movement Perspective," 28.

²²⁰ Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 45.

²²¹ Giustozzi, 47.

3. Timing

In 2014, IS-Central decided that the time was right globally, to begin establishing the caliphate.²²² Expansion to AF/PAK seemed to be an appropriate next front for several reasons. First, IS-Central recognized that it must seize the opportunity to capitalize on the successes in Iraq and Syria. Second, IS-Central had access to Afghan and Pakistani jihadists during their time fighting in Syria as early as 2013, which allowed IS to begin indoctrination and opened up a line of communication for early coordination and recruiting efforts in central Asia. Third, IS was aware of the fractures within the Taliban and discouraged members of the AF/PAK Taliban were intrigued by the IS brand. Additionally, the Quetta *Shura*, the political council comprised of decision makers within the Taliban leadership, was losing credibility.²²³ Initially, IS-K tried to build in roads with the Quetta Shura. This was seemingly an IS-K effort to build some social cohesion with local leaders and a move to appear less intimidating; however, IS-K never intended to make the Taliban or the Quetta Shura a partner in its efforts to expand and wage jihad across central Asia. IS-K always planned to supplant the Taliban and was likely using the early negotiations to buy time for IS-K to build its organization to eventually challenge the Taliban for jihadist supremacy in the region.²²⁴

4. Demographics

IS-K and IS-Central share Sunni Muslims as their target population. IS-K sought support and allegiance, voluntary or coerced, from Sunnis; however, IS-Central also focused on destroying the “near enemy” and launched attacks against Sunni Muslims, especially supporters of the Taliban.²²⁵ IS-K continued sectarian targeting of Shia Muslims particularly the Hazaras, a Persian ethnic Shia group that represents approximately 20% of

²²² Giustozzi, 11.

²²³ Giustozzi, 20, 155, 174–75.

²²⁴ Giustozzi, 45.

²²⁵ Johnson, “The Rise and Stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan,” 13.

Afghanistan's population.²²⁶ IS-K tended to attack religious and cultural sites of minority communities like the Hazaras and the Sufis in Pakistan.²²⁷ Additionally, IS-K's external support from foreign donors and state sponsors had shaped some of the operations in terms of timing and focus of their attacks.²²⁸

IS-K was considered a foreign organization when it arrived in AF/PAK. Afghanistan has historically been a hotbed of jihadist activity; however, the country has been generally inhospitable to revisionist jihadist groups like IS-K, who seek to fuel sectarian violence and remove or change longstanding social and economic constructs.²²⁹ To overcome the initial perception of being an invading group, IS-K used its member, who hailed from all across Afghanistan, to recruit from their local areas. This tactic allowed IS-K to manufacture the appearance of being indigenous and increased its influence in local areas.²³⁰

E. ANALYSIS

Based on the study of IS-K, it is clear that IS-Central conducted Unconventional Warfare in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is difficult to determine whether IS-K will be considered a successful operation for IS-Central; however, this also depends on the metric for success. IS-K has vast long term goals: 1) overthrowing the established governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as replacing the Taliban as the hegemonic jihadist actor in the region, 2) gaining exclusive control over the terrain in order to contribute to the growth of the Islamic caliphate, and 3) growing the IS-K military and become financially independent of foreign aid, so that it can extend operations into central Asia.²³¹

²²⁶ Ashraf, "ISIS Khorasan: Presence and Potential in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Region," 19; Sarah Hucal, "Afghanistan: Who Are the Hazaras?," *Aljazeera Online*, June 27, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/06/afghanistan-hazaras-160623093601127.html>.

²²⁷ Jadoon, "Allied & Lethal: Islamic State Khorasan's Network and Organizational Capacity in Afghanistan and Pakistan," 65; Megan Specia, "Who Are Sufi Muslims and Why Do Some Extremists Hate Them?," *The New York Times*, November 24, 2017, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/24/world/middleeast/sufi-muslim-explainer.html>.

²²⁸ Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 37–38.

²²⁹ Johnson, "The Rise and Stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan," 6.

²³⁰ Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*, 50.

²³¹ Giustozzi, *The Islamic State in Khorasan*.

These are far reaching, perhaps unattainable, objectives given the level of IS-K's military capability and overall support in the region. Measuring success against these goals would likely make IS-K a potential failure.

However, considering that IS-K operations have resulted in the disruption of two sovereign governments and the Taliban, development of safe-haven locations for IS-Central leaders in exile, and a foothold in the region with access to additional resources, IS-K could be seen as an initial success. This, of course, was not without its struggles. IS-K's early internal organizational issues and rifts between Afghan and Pakistani leadership delayed meaningful progress for the group. IS-K's initial hard lines on the implementation of Sharia, bans on the drug trade, and the practice of *takfir* (excommunication of Muslims who do not adhere to Sharia) created animosity among the population and alienated IS-K. However, recognizing the opportunity to demonstrate flexibility IS-K, likely with IS-Central's approval, showed its pragmatism and adjusted its stance on issues to gain support.

There are three substantive lessons learned from the IS-K experiment. First, from its experience with JN, IS-Central recognized that remotely managing expansion is difficult and dedicated more resources to the task. IS-Central committed money, a Special Representative, advisors, auditors to ensure that IS-K was built as close to the IS-Central model as possible, and media support. Second, IS-K must be willing to negotiate in order to maintain support in Khorasan. IS-K's practicality on extreme policies like *takfir* helped the group establish some credibility and demonstrated that it was willing to make some concessions. These exemptions are almost certainly temporary. Lastly, and perhaps the most noteworthy lesson, while IS-K is a product of IS-Central, it is also a proxy force for its various outside donors. IS-Central can claim that its influence and oversight led to IS-K's structure and ideology, but until IS-K is financially autonomous, it will also remain a tool for states with interests in the region. It is likely that allowing outside financial contributions is a necessary means to an end for IS-Central, which plans to eventually facilitate financial independence for all of its wilayats; but currently, IS resources are limited in light of its recent losses in Syria and Iraq.

V. CASE STUDY: ISLAMIC STATE—WEST AFRICA PROVINCE

A. OVERVIEW

There is sufficient evidence that IS-Central deliberately acted to support Islamic State-West Africa Province (ISWA) through UW. IS-Central formally recognized Islamic State-West Africa Province (ISWA) through an official announcement made by IS-Central spokesman Abu Muhammed al-Adnani, ISWA greatly increased its media capability, a trademark of IS-Central, and there were robust changes in ISWA tactics and the group's organization.²³² All of this suggests IS-Central's direct involvement in ISWA's creation, however, experts debate the extent to which ISWA is connected to IS-Central. As Jacob Zenn highlights in his examination of the literature regarding ISWA, some scholars believe ISWA is linked to IS-Central in name alone, while others believe ISWA is a legitimate wilayat that receives formal guidance and support from Baghdadi.²³³ To understand ISWA, we must also briefly examine Boko Haram, the group that eventually became ISWA.

Mohammed Yusuf (Yusef) founded Boko Haram, officially known as *Jama`at ahl al-sunna li-da`wa wa-l-qital* (The Sunni Group for Preaching and Fighting), in 2002. Initially, Boko Haram, which translated means “Western education is taboo,” was considered a locally developed organization that used limited violence to achieve its aims; however, following Yusef's death in 2009, Boko Haram went through a major transition and became an ultra-violent terrorist organization.²³⁴ Boko Haram (BH) became a household name in April 2014 after it infamously kidnapped 300 young girls from a school

²³² Jacob Zenn, “The Islamic State's Provinces on the Peripheries: Juxtaposing the Pledges from Boko Haram in Nigeria and Abu Sayyaf and Maute Group in the Philippines,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 1 (2019): 87–104.

²³³ Zenn.

²³⁴ Other translations of the name Boko Haram are “western education is forbidden” or “western education is a sin.” Mapping Militant Organizations, “Boko Haram” (Stanford University CISAC, March 2018), https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/boko-haram#highlight_text_11835; J. Peter Pham, “How Boko Haram Became the Islamic State's West Africa Province,” *The Journal of International Security Affairs* 30 (2016): 1.

in Chibok, Nigeria.²³⁵ By that point, BH had evolved into a significant insurgency that controlled terrain and population centers in Nigeria. Since 2009, BH has been responsible for the deaths of approximately 30,000 people and the displacement of an additional two million.²³⁶ The Global Terrorism Index labelled BH “the most deadly terrorist group in the world” in 2015.²³⁷

IS-Central saw an opportunity in BH. BH was already a violent salafist group operating in an area with salafist civilian supporters.²³⁸ BH also has the organizational capacity to launch large military operations and control terrain.²³⁹ While reports differed regarding coordination between BH and IS-Central, there were some indications that BH leader Abubakar Shekau (Shekau) and Baghdadi discussed joining forces via written correspondence in 2014.²⁴⁰ Yet other reports stated that subordinate commanders within BH and the eventual leader of ISWA, Abu Musab al-Barnawi, conducted coordination with IS-Central on their own.²⁴¹ Regardless, in March 2015, Shekau publicly offered his allegiance to IS. Five days later, IS accepted and announced the establishment of ISWA.²⁴²

Since ISWA was formed, it has waxed and waned. ISWA went through a tumultuous IS-Central directed leadership change from Shekau to Abu Musab al-Barnawi (Barnawi) in 2016. Additionally, there was a split within the organization, which resulted

²³⁵ Faith Karimi and Aminu Abubakar, “Boko Haram: No Deal with Nigeria Government,” *CNN*, November 2, 2014, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/11/01/world/africa/nigeria-boko-haram-denies-deal/index.html>.

²³⁶ Jacob Zenn, “Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa’s Enduring Insurgency,” *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, May 2018, 144.

²³⁷ “Global Terrorism Index 2015: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism” (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015), 4, <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf>.

²³⁸ Alex Thurston, “Salafism in Northern Nigeria Beyond Boko Haram,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 27, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/salafism-northern-nigeria-beyond-boko-haram>.

²³⁹ John Campbell, “Nigeria’s Boko Haram Moving Toward Governance?,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 7, 2014, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/nigerias-boko-haram-moving-toward-governance>.

²⁴⁰ “ISIS Affiliate Expands Territory in West Africa,” *PBS NewsHour*, February 17, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/isis-affiliate-expands-territory-in-west-africa>.

²⁴¹ Zenn, “The Islamic State’s Provinces on the Peripheries: Juxtaposing the Pledges from Boko Haram in Nigeria and Abu Sayyaf and Maute Group in the Philippines,” 91.

²⁴² BBC, “Is ‘Accepts’ Boko Haram’s Allegiance,” *BBC News*, March 13, 2015, sec. Middle East, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31862992>.

in two factions: one that is officially recognized by IS-Central and led by Barnawi, and the other which became the Shekau faction. Shekau's group still claims to be loyal to IS-Central but is not formally acknowledged nor has it been denounced by IS-Central.²⁴³

B. THE POPULATION

1. Legitimacy

Legitimacy is a critical aspect of success for any insurgency and this was especially true for ISWA. Following the internal split creating Barnawi's ISWA and Shekau's faction, there was increased competition for legitimacy between the two groups.²⁴⁴ While the groups were not necessarily at war with each other, they occasionally had violent clashes, as each desired its own legitimacy.²⁴⁵ ISWA generated its legitimacy in three major ways: professionalism, propaganda (internal and external messaging), and success on the battlefield.

IS-Central considered itself to be the vanguard for Sunni Muslims' ascension around the world. Therefore, it was no surprise that it went to great lengths to ensure that ISWA conducted itself as professionally as its sponsor. Like IS-Central, ISWA promoted its religious credentials and utilized a deliberate indoctrination process, which, Abdulbasit Kassim describes as "internal study sessions," to shape its membership. ISWA study sessions consisted of teaching and reading Islamic texts and religious guidance documents were translated into the local language.²⁴⁶ Study session materials and key messages were directed internally, for members of the organization, and externally, as recruiting tools. Jacob Olidort and Kassim describe the method that IS-Central used to oversee ISWA's development:

²⁴³ Robert Postings, "Nigeria's Military Struggles with Islamic State: Part 1 – an Upsurge in Attacks," *The Defense Post*, January 15, 2019, <https://thedefensepost.com/2019/01/15/nigeria-military-struggles-islamic-state-iswa-part-1-upsurge-in-attacks/>.

²⁴⁴ Zenn, "Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa's Enduring Insurgency", vii.

²⁴⁵ Crisis Group, "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province," *Crisis Group*, May 16, 2019, 7, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/273-facing-challenge-islamic-state-west-africa-province>.

²⁴⁶ Zenn, "Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa's Enduring Insurgency," 24–25.

The Islamic State-ization program of ISWAP is potent evidence that the leaders of the group are in constant communication with the Delegated Committee of the Islamic State (al-Lajna al-Mufawwada), “a select group of knowledgeable, upright individuals with perception and leadership skills delegated by the caliph for the supervision of all the Islamic State’s provinces, departments, committees, and offices.”²⁴⁷

ISWA has also received media support from IS-Central. IS-Central highlighted ISWA activities and operations via its robust propaganda and media infrastructure. IS-Central publicized successful ISWA military operations and appealing stories of ISWA activities to support the population through media outlets like *al Naba*, Amaq News Agency, and the IS-Central official Telegram channels.²⁴⁸ This support made it appear like ISWA had the same high quality, professional media capability as IS-Central.

Additionally, ISWA gained legitimacy through its military capabilities and successful operations against state security forces. ISWA saw significant military defeat between 2015–2016 when the Nigerian government received essential assistance from the Multinational Joint Task Force, a unified coalition of military elements from neighboring nations.²⁴⁹ However, ISWA experienced a resurgence between 2017–2018 and earned several significant victories over state forces.²⁵⁰ With these successes, ISWA enjoyed renewed military prowess.

2. Ideology

Like IS-Central, ISWA is a Sunni Salafist group. Its roots are from BH, which was heavily influenced by *Wahhabi* practices from Saudi Arabian Islamic jurisprudence universities and clerics. Both ISWA and BH believed in enacting Sharia law across its territory in Nigeria and ousting the secular government. Like IS-Central, ISWA stoked

²⁴⁷ For a detailed discussion of “Islamic State-ization,” see Jacob Olidort, “Inside the Caliphate’s Classroom: Textbooks, Guidance Literature and Indoctrination Methods of the Islamic State,” Washington Institute of Near East Policy, August 2016. Zenn, 25.

²⁴⁸ Zenn, 26.

²⁴⁹ Postings, “Nigeria’s Military Struggles with Islamic State,” January 15, 2019.

²⁵⁰ Robert Postings, “Nigeria’s Military Struggles with Islamic State: Part 1 – an Upsurge in Attacks,” *The Defense Post*, January 15, 2019, <https://thedefensepost.com/2019/01/15/nigeria-military-struggles-islamic-state-iswa-part-1-upsurge-in-attacks/>.

sectarian violence through the use of terrorist tactics to divide ethnic and religious groups. While BH has declared Shia and Sufi Muslims enemies, it also focused on targeting and persecuting the Nigerian Christian population.²⁵¹

Prior to becoming ISWA, BH's flagrant use of violence, in a way, became a part of its ideology. The removal of Shekau as the leader of ISWA, in 2016, was largely due to his commitment to extreme violence against civilians. In his brief historical overview of BH, Fergus Kelly writes, "Shekau's ruthless brutality, his definition of takfir and what constituted apostasy, and his targeting of Muslims among other things, caused rifts to fester within the group."²⁵² While it may be difficult to believe that a notoriously violent jihadist organization like IS-Central, would see Shekau's methods as too violent, that was apparently the case. IS-Central realized that Shekau's violence was alienating west African Muslims and, in an effort to win over some of the population, IS-Central directed ISWA to shift away from intense violence and polarizing activities. An example of this was seen in April 2018, when ISWA released several kidnapped female college students from Dapchi, Nigeria, after consultation with IS-Central. In a statement made by Abu Bashir, the head of the ISWA Shura council, he said the abduction of the women would portray ISWA in a negative light at a critical time when it was trying to win over Muslims in west Africa.²⁵³

3. Grievances

ISWA's grievances reside with the state governments in west Africa, specifically, Nigeria but also Niger, Chad, and Cameroon.²⁵⁴ ISWA sought to overthrow secular governments and replace them with Islamic systems and Sharia law. From its roots in BH, ISWA also desired to put an end to Western education in the region, as it considered it to be against Islam. BH considered Western education to be "within schools which have been

²⁵¹ Sahara Reporters, "Boko Haram Gives Reason For Release Of Dapchi Girls, Denies Ceasefire Talks With FG," *Sahara Reporters*, April 9, 2018, <http://saharareporters.com/2018/04/09/boko-haram-gives-reason-release-dapchi-girls-denies-ceasefire-talks-fg>.

²⁵² Fergus Kelly, "Boko Haram or Islamic State West Africa ... or Both?," *The Defense Post*, February 1, 2019, <https://thedefensepost.com/2019/02/01/boko-haram-islamic-state-west-africa/>.

²⁵³ Sahara Reporters, "Boko Haram Gives Reason For Release Of Dapchi Girls, Denies Ceasefire Talks With FG."

²⁵⁴ Crisis Group, "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province," 1.

established by missionaries which includes the education curriculum from elementary education to secondary schooling and institutes to national service to employment.”²⁵⁵

ISWA also co-opted local popular grievances from the areas it began to control. An overall lack of governmental representation, essential services, medical care, and security were all common sources of frustration among civilians in the region. ISWA successfully leveraged these concerns and began systematically addressing them.²⁵⁶ ISWA was also cognizant of the population’s negative perceptions of groups like Shekau’s faction and other extremist organizations in the region. To present itself as a legitimate alternative, ISWA reportedly toned-down violence against civilians, limited forcible resource extraction and robbery, and focused the majority of its attacks on state and military targets.²⁵⁷

4. Resources

Reports indicated that ISWA was receiving some financial and training support from IS-Central until 2017, when IS-Central came under extreme duress in Iraq and Syria.²⁵⁸ Losing support from IS-Central likely only had a marginal impact on ISWA operations. ISWA always operated in areas with limited economic resources, generally poor people, and rudimentary infrastructure. As a result, the group became resilient and creative in ways to sustain itself.²⁵⁹ ISWA effectively leveraged control over local markets and imposed taxes on livestock, farming, and local goods within its territory. ISWA also used alternative methods to acquire funding and material resources such as kidnapping children from wealthy or well-known families for ransom and conducting confiscation check points; however, ISWA’s shift to build stronger relationships with the civilian population resulted in the decline of these activities. More recently, ISWA encouraged

²⁵⁵ Michael A. Peters, “‘Western Education Is Sinful’: Boko Haram and the Abduction of Chibok Schoolgirls,” *Policy Futures in Education* 12, no. 2 (January 2014): 186, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.2304/pfie.2014.12.2.186>.

²⁵⁶ Crisis Group, “Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province,” 18–19.

²⁵⁷ Zenn, “Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa’s Enduring Insurgency,” 31.

²⁵⁸ Crisis Group, “Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province,” 9.

²⁵⁹ Pham, “How Boko Haram Became the Islamic State’s West Africa Province,” 21.

trade between the group and the population to secure resources and shape local commerce. Fuel has been among ISWA's top resource priorities in order to maintain its vehicle fleet, which enabled them to travel long distances to maintain control and govern large, sparsely populated areas in the region.²⁶⁰ Additionally, ISWA used battlefield recovery following raids and attacks, to obtain additional weapons, equipment, ammunition, medical supplies, and other resources to continue operations.²⁶¹

C. ORGANIZATIONAL CONTROL FUNCTIONS

1. Leadership

Mohammed Yusuf, a Muslim cleric from Nigeria, was a member of the *Izala* (Arabic word for removing) sect of Islam who started on the path of Salafism as a student of Ja'far Adam, a notable Salafist preacher and graduate of the Islamic University in Medina, Saudi Arabia.²⁶² Yusuf learned from Adam and used his position within the Nigerian Muslim community to denounce western educational practices and the secular government of Nigeria.²⁶³ He sought to spread sharia throughout Nigeria, in opposition to what he believed to be a corrupt Nigerian government, and establish an Islamic state.²⁶⁴ Yusuf was killed while trying to escape police custody in 2009, opening the door for his successor, Shekau.²⁶⁵

Following the death of Yusuf, Shekau saw an opportunity to seize control of the organization and seek vengeance for the members of BH who were killed by Nigerian security forces. He married one of Yusuf's wives, adopted his children, and assumed his role as leader.²⁶⁶ Reports indicate that Shekau was a fearless battlefield leader with

²⁶⁰ Crisis Group, "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province," 19.

²⁶¹ Postings, "Nigeria's Military Struggles with Islamic State," January 15, 2019.

²⁶² Thurston, "Salafism in Northern Nigeria Beyond Boko Haram."

²⁶³ Thurston.

²⁶⁴ BBC, "Nigeria Sect Head Dies in Custody," *British Broadcasting Corporation*, July 31, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8177451.stm>.

²⁶⁵ BBC.

²⁶⁶ Abdullah Tasiu Abubakar, "Profile: Boko Haram Leader Abubakar Shekau," *BBC News*, May 9, 2014, sec. Africa, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-18020349>.

unwavering extremist convictions. In a video recording from January 2012, Shekau said “I enjoy killing anyone that God commands me to kill—the way I enjoy killing chickens and rams.”²⁶⁷ Following Shekau assuming control of BH, the group took on his violent personality. BH's level of violence increased immediately as it retaliated against Nigerian security forces.²⁶⁸

Shekau openly praised Baghdadi and IS-Central for their success in establishing a caliphate in Iraq and Syria. In August 2014, shortly after the Baghdadi declared the IS caliphate, Shekau announced that BH had also established a caliphate in Nigeria.²⁶⁹ Shortly after accepting Shekau's pledge of allegiance to Baghdadi, the relationship between IS-Central and Shekau became strained.²⁷⁰ IS did not approve of Shekau's commitment to extreme violence and felt that he was alienating the population IS sought support from. As a result, in the August 2, 2016 issue of the IS newsletter, *al Naba*, IS announced that Shekau was no longer the leader of ISWA and that Abu Musab al-Barnawi was the newly appointed emir of ISWA.²⁷¹

Shekau did not accept the change in leadership. Instead, ISWA split with one group remaining loyal to Shekau and the other following Barnawi.²⁷² Barnawi was a logical choice for IS-Central. He is allegedly the son of Mohammed Yusef, which provided him with familial legitimacy. He is also a seasoned jihadist with leadership experience from his time serving as the spokesman for another Nigerian jihadist group, the al Qaeda offshoot, *Ansaru*.²⁷³

²⁶⁷ Abubakar.

²⁶⁸ “Global Terrorism Index 2014: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism” (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2014), <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Global-Terrorism-Index-Report-2014.pdf>; “GTI 2015.”

²⁶⁹ Pham, “How Boko Haram Became the Islamic State's West Africa Province,” 22.

²⁷⁰ BBC, “Is ‘Accepts’ Boko Haram's Allegiance.”

²⁷¹ “قطع طريق إمداد الرافضة إلى معسكر القبار,” *Al Naba*, August 2, 2016, https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/the-islamic-state-e2809cal-nabacc84_-newsletter-4122.pdf.

²⁷² Postings, “Nigeria's Military Struggles with Islamic State,” January 15, 2019.

²⁷³ Counter Extremism Project, “Abu Musab Al-Barnawi” (Counter Extremism Project, August 9, 2016), <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/abu-musab-al-barnawi>.

2. Governance

As of May 2019, reporting indicated that ISWA has been successful in its attempts to control territory mainly because it did what the state was, unable or unwilling to do, govern. ISWA's government initiatives were a shift from its earlier behavior. In 2017, Barnawi did not want the group tied to physical terrain. At that time, ISWA preferred the security of being mobile and able to transit through Nigeria and the surrounding safe havens in Niger and other areas.²⁷⁴ In many of the areas ISWA controlled, there had been no legitimate government presence or influence for a long period of time. As such, ISWA implemented systems to create "Islamic justice" and basic security, which, although violent in many circumstances, lowered crime in some areas and was generally seen as positive when compared to relative lawlessness.²⁷⁵ ISWA also opened schools for Islamic education and provided basic healthcare for locals. According to International Crisis Group's study of ISWA,

ISWA has at its command a number of medical specialists, both militants and captives, who serve not just fighters and their families, but also local civilians, sometimes for a fee, sometimes for free. The group procures medicine in raids on health centers or purchases it in Cameroon and Nigeria's Yobe state. ISWA can organize the transfer of seriously ill patients to hospitals in neighboring countries.²⁷⁶

ISWA did not discontinue its coercive means of control however, by providing services, security, and a legal system, ISWA cultivated a community of support from areas that were largely disregarded by the state.²⁷⁷

3. Guerilla, Auxiliary, and Underground Networks

ISWA's governance capabilities allowed the organization to grow and expand its support networks through an increased number of followers; and, ISWA also leveraged

²⁷⁴ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Jacob Zenn, and Nathaniel Barr, "Islamic State 2021: Possible Futures in North and West Africa" (Foundation for Defense of Democracies Press, February 2017), 28, https://s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/defenddemocracy/uploads/documents/022017_DGR_ISIL_Report.pdf.

²⁷⁵ Crisis Group, "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province," 16.

²⁷⁶ Crisis Group, 17.

²⁷⁷ Crisis Group, 16.

existing networks in the region. ISWA's roots are with BH and, to some extent al Qaeda, which provided ISWA with options for support and operations. There is evidence that as far back as 2009, BH coordinated with al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al Shabaab for major attacks.²⁷⁸ The likelihood of ISWA continuing to coordinate with competitors like AQIM is low; however, ISWA has also utilized IS-Central related networks from Libya and other affiliates in Africa. According to the International Crisis Group, "an unspecified number of Nigerian and West African militants who fought abroad for ISIS have reportedly joined ISWA and several civilians claim to have seen trainers of Arab origin in ISWA areas." Additional reports from February 2019, claim that ISWA members from Baga, Nigeria, traveled to fight or train with IS in Libya.²⁷⁹ These reports indicated that on some level, ISWA is in communication with IS-Central's other branches in the region. Another example of this is with the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS), a newly recognized affiliate that operates in and around Mali. To some extent, IS-Central may have aligned ISGS under ISWA in order to establish clearer lines of communication and increase oversight of the group.²⁸⁰

In terms of attacks and military operations, ISWA has focused on military targets to degrade the state's legitimacy and gain control over terrain but, also to limit civilian casualties. ISWA has not completely ceased attacks against civilian targets but, it has attempted to concentrate civilian attacks on those that have some type of connection to "local officials, chiefs, vigilantes, and suspected informers."²⁸¹ In 2018, ISWA attacks against government targets were effective and gradually increased in frequency. Between January and July 2018, ISWA claimed only four attacks; however, between August and November 2018, ISWA claimed 23 attacks.²⁸² Additionally, as of February 2019, it was

²⁷⁸ Gartenstein-Ross, Zenn, and Barr, "Islamic State 2021: Possible Futures in North and West Africa," 27–28.

²⁷⁹ Crisis Group, "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province," 9–10.

²⁸⁰ Robert Postings, "Islamic State Puts the Sahel in West Africa – for Now," *The Defense Post*, May 30, 2019, <https://thedefensepost.com/2019/05/30/islamic-state-greater-sahara-west-africa/>.

²⁸¹ Crisis Group, "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province," 11.

²⁸² Omar S. Mahmood, "Is Islamic State in West Africa Becoming More Hardline?," *ISS Africa*, November 2018, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/is-islamic-state-in-west-africa-becoming-more-hardline>.

reported that ISWA overran 14 Nigerian military bases and handedly defeat Nigerian security forces on several occasions.²⁸³ State governments have typically not confirmed details of ISWA attacks, likely to protect their legitimacy in light of major military defeat; however, the lack of effective state counter-measures and shrinking resources will likely lead to a continuation of these trends.²⁸⁴

D. OPPORTUNITIES

1. Environmental

While ISWA primarily operated in Nigeria, it was also active in Chad, Niger, and Cameroon.²⁸⁵ Weakened government infrastructure created porous borders between nations in the region which allowed ISWA to travel between states and create insurgent lines of communication. Additionally, there are two major factors that play in ISWA's favor. First, the terrain is sparsely populated with large uninhabited areas throughout, which made it difficult for a weakened and under equipped state security apparatus to control. Second, the Nigerian military shifted its strategy to focus on static defense of military outposts, this allowed ISWA relative freedom of maneuver and the ability to choose the time and location of their attacks.²⁸⁶

2. Political

IS-Central's decision to expand through ISWA was logical because it was an opportunity to exploit an ineffective governmental system. The lack of an effective state government, particularly in the far reaches of Nigeria, allowed ISWA to take root. ISWA capitalized on the pressure and free space created by the other militant groups that were operating in the area for years, making northeastern Nigeria, parts of Chad, Niger, and Cameroon, inhospitable for government forces and agencies. According to the Armed

²⁸³ "ISIS Affiliate Expands Territory in West Africa."

²⁸⁴ Robert Postings, "Nigeria's Military Struggles with Islamic State: Part 2 – Systemic Issues Hamper the Fight," *The Defense Post*, January 25, 2019, <https://thedefensepost.com/2019/01/25/nigeria-military-struggles-islamic-state-iswa-part-2-systemic-issues/>.

²⁸⁵ Kelly, "Boko Haram or Islamic State West Africa ... or Both?"

²⁸⁶ Postings, "Nigeria's Military Struggles with Islamic State," January 25, 2019.

Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), volatility, violence, militancy, and civil unrest in the region has steadily increased over the last several years which will likely allow for ISWA to maintain its foothold in the near term.²⁸⁷ ACLED also predicts that the Sahel region of Africa (Mauritania, Senegal, Niger, Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Algeria) will continue to be a major geopolitical dilemma for the foreseeable future.²⁸⁸

IS-Central also exploited turbulent political conditions internal to BH. In 2015, BH was the most active and violent jihadist organization in the world. During the time just before Shekau pledged allegiance to IS-Central, Shekau was feeling pressure from his sub-commanders to join with IS-Central. At that point, IS-Central was close to the peak of its power within Iraq and Syria, eclipsing al Qaeda as the premier jihadist organization in the world. The other leaders within BH believed that aligning with IS-Central would provide them with leverage to eventually oust Shekau, whose violent ideology was becoming counter-productive. Shekau also realized that if he did not pledge his allegiance to Baghdadi, he might risk an internal uprising amongst his subordinates. Interestingly, Baghdadi might have been hesitant to acknowledge ISWA as a legitimate wilayat if Shekau was not in control. His name recognition, reputation, and conviction to jihad were some of the qualities that attracted IS-Central to BH in the first place.²⁸⁹

3. Timing

Brand management, more so than opportunities on the ground in Nigeria, dictated the timing IS-Central's expansion to the area. In 2015, BH was beginning to cede territory to Nigerian security forces and the Multinational Joint Task Force. IS-Central, while in control of large parts of Syria and Iraq, began encountering resistance from Iraqi security forces and Iranian-backed militias, in places like Tikrit. The official connection between

²⁸⁷ ACLED, "Dashboard ACLED Data" (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, September 2019), <https://www.acleddata.com/dashboard/>.

²⁸⁸ Roudabeh Kishi, "Ten Conflicts to Worry About in 2019" (ACLED, February 1, 2019), <https://www.acleddata.com/2019/02/01/ten-conflicts-to-worry-about-in-2019/>; Thirteen.org, "Africa - Explore the Regions - Sahel," Thirteen.org, accessed October 14, 2019, https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/africa/explore/sahel/sahel_overview_lo.html.

²⁸⁹ Zenn, "The Islamic State's Provinces on the Peripheries: Juxtaposing the Pledges from Boko Haram in Nigeria and Abu Sayyaf and Maute Group in the Philippines," 91–92.

BH and IS-Central provided both groups with a propaganda story to take attention off their struggles on the battlefield.²⁹⁰

While the poor conditions within west Africa offered IS-Central opportunities to exploit, those conditions have been, and will likely remain, relatively unchanged for years. A lack of government response to major crises among the populations, the inability to prevent armed conflict and defeat internal threats, and non-existent economic opportunities allowed several insurgent groups to grow.

4. Demographics

ISWA sought support from the disenfranchised Sunni Muslim population in west Africa and, with the change to its population engagement strategy, ISWA grew a popular support base within the areas it controlled. There is little reported on how ISWA addressed Muslim minorities, Shias, and other religious groups in the region. ISWA's operating area is generally inhabited by mainstream Nigerian Salafi Muslims. The Nigerian Salafi civilian population were routinely confrontational with non-Muslims and other Muslim groups, however, not all Nigerian Salafists are jihadists.²⁹¹ Regardless, the Salafi population, disparate living conditions, and a lack of state governance, provided ISWA with a hospitable environment to operate.

Civilians did not appear to see ISWA as a foreign organization. This is likely due to its local roots from BH. On this point it should be highlighted that IS-Central did not attempt to spread ISWA outside of its core areas in Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon. There are several IS-Central franchises across north and west Africa, which is likely a reflection of IS-Central's understanding of the unique cultures and ethnic groups in the region and their experience in expanding in other locations.²⁹²

²⁹⁰ Pham, "How Boko Haram Became the Islamic State's West Africa Province," 24.

²⁹¹ Thurston, "Salafism in Northern Nigeria Beyond Boko Haram."

²⁹² Jason Warner, "Sub-Saharan Africa's Three 'New' Islamic State Affiliates," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* 10, no. 1 (January 23, 2017), <https://ctc.usma.edu/sub-saharan-africas-three-new-islamic-state-affiliates/>.

E. ANALYSIS

ISWA has proven to be a formidable force on the west African battlefield. Its routine defeat of Nigerian security forces, ability to control terrain, and spectacular victories have provided IS-Central with a pressure release as it experienced defeats in Iraq and Syria.²⁹³ ISWA has given IS-Central fuel for its robust propaganda machine to take some of the focus off its territorial defeat in Iraq and Syria. There is substantial potential for ISWA to remain in west Africa given the lack of effective government response, the attrition of security forces, and the poor counterinsurgency strategy employed by the state.

ISWA's methods of governance developed significantly over time. There are two potential take-aways from this evolution of ISWA's behavior. First, IS-Central's guidance to ISWA has likely become more informed by its experiences in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. Overly strict and swift implementation of Sharia law resulted in some negative effects, particularly in securing support and cooperation from the population. As such, ISWA has recognized that it needs to be pragmatic at times and become a more adaptable organization. These practices have shown to be successful. Second, ISWA understands the competition it is in with other jihadi groups. ISWA is competing for resources and support with organizations that have been overly violent and oppressive of civilians. Modifying its behavior to avoid harsh treatment of civilians has increased ISWA's popularity in comparison to competitors and the state government.

There is one major outstanding vulnerability with ISWA and that is al Qaeda's ability to potentially co-opt the group. Barnawi has roots in BH from his family lineage and he was chosen as the west Africa emir by Baghdadi; however, prior to joining ISWA, Barnawi was a member of Ansaru. Ansaru is considered al Qaeda's affiliate in Nigeria and if IS-Central continues to suffer major defeats or is otherwise unable to direct and support ISWA from afar, it may provide al Qaeda with an opportunity to move in.²⁹⁴

²⁹³ Zenn, "The Islamic State's Provinces on the Peripheries: Juxtaposing the Pledges from Boko Haram in Nigeria and Abu Sayyaf and Maute Group in the Philippines," 98.

²⁹⁴ Alexander Smith, "A Look at the Boko Haram Splinter Group Sowing Terror," *NBC News*, April 10, 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/missing-nigeria-schoolgirls/ansaru-boko-haram-splinter-group-sows-terror-nigeria-n551661>.

VI. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

This research has used a theory of UW to examine three distinct case studies of IS expansion. While the level and type of support varies across and within each case, it is clear that IS has used its own version of UW to expand. Through IS sponsored UW, the organization has skillfully created the beginnings of its global caliphate, by adopting and supporting unique local jihadist groups, in regions that IS has identified as critical. IS first chose to expand to Syria because it was a country in the Islamic heartland with a Sunni majority population and an authoritarian government. Afghanistan was the birthplace of modern jihad and the keystone for further expansion into Asia. West Africa was a burgeoning jihadist landscape that provided IS the freedom to maneuver through vastly uncontrolled space.

A. SIMILARITIES

Cross comparison of the three case studies yields several similarities. Predictably, in each case, the groups effectively co-opted local grievances and sought to implement a version of the IS-Central model of government. Additionally, there are four other relevant conditions that IS-Central used during its decision-making process and strategy implementation: 1) exploit the maneuver space created by failed or failing governments, 2) manipulate fractures within sponsored groups to assert control, 3) allow limited ideologically flexibility and pragmatism for critical issues, and 4) leverage favorable geography and maximize safe havens.

First, each of the target countries had a failed or failing political, governmental, and security systems. Syria's civil war, the inability of the central government to secure and administer the eastern portion of the country, and ineffective essential services systems, created a vacuum for JN to fill. Likewise, in Afghanistan, over a decade of war, vast under-governed space and the lack of governmental presence, along with the Taliban's inability to be everywhere the government was not, gave IS-K the opportunity to establish itself. Nigeria's war-torn northeast region had little military presence and the security forces present were under-supplied and minimally manned. ISWA successfully took control from

the Nigerian government in that area and replaced the void that was already present with effective solutions.

The groups that IS-Central chose to sponsor were relatively effective but, more importantly, each had internal dynamics that could be manipulated in IS-Central's favor. From the beginning, JN desired to be seen as a unifier of Syrians against their common enemy, the Assad government. In this way, IS-Central supported JN as it co-opted struggling, less organized, less effective, and under-supported groups in Syria. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, IS-Central recruited from the very organization it hoped to depose, the Taliban. Fears of Taliban leadership reaching a negotiated settlement with the Afghan government drove many fighters and some leaders to IS-K. IS-Central and leaders within ISWA used internal fractures to push Shekau toward pledging allegiance to Baghdadi. IS-Central used its leverage to remove Shekau and replace him with Barnawi, a leader it could control.

IS-Central franchises appeared to be pragmatic and surprisingly flexible in their stance on some ideological issues. JN pushed a nationalist narrative and supported it with action that allowed it to build alliances and partnerships with other jihadist groups. JN also masked its affiliation with ISI to gain support from the population after it realized that IS-Central's extreme religious ideology would not be well received by the moderate Syrian Muslim population. In Afghanistan, IS-K's pragmatism on extreme policies like takfir and the banning of opium related products, helped the group establish rapport with the tribes during tenuous times. ISWA also appeared to be reasonable as it tempered its use of violence against civilians gain favor with the population.

Geographic considerations also played a role in IS-Central's decision calculus. IS-Central chose locations that were geographically advantageous for their operations. Syria, Afghanistan, and Nigeria all had porous borders which the groups exploited to facilitate the flow of logistics and personnel. Additionally, it allowed for the groups to transit out of their immediate operational areas if it became necessary to avoid pressure from the states' counterinsurgency effort.

B. DIFFERENCES

The differences within and across the cases make each unique. While all three groups sought support from Sunni Muslim populations, in each instance, there were distinct ethnic and cultural variations. In Syria, JN dealt with a majority Sunni Arab population, which as a Sunni Arab organization, IS-Central was comfortable with. Additionally, IS-Central's roots in Iraq and the support it received from Syria during the war in Iraq provided the group with long-standing support networks. In Afghanistan, Sunni Muslims were tribally affiliated, which added a degree of complexity. Lastly, in Nigeria, ISWA operated in an area that was dominated by mainstream Salafists, which minimized some ideological differences between the population and ISWA.

Timing for each case was also different. Baghdadi recognized that the chaos that resulted from the Arab Spring and subsequent Syrian Civil War created an opening that IS-Central could capitalize on. The timing in this case was based on recognition of opportunity for offensive expansion after IS-Central had reestablished itself in Iraq. In Afghanistan, IS-Central sought to capitalize on its success in Iraq and Syria, but also it also realized that it needed to prepare additional safe havens for IS-Central leadership once the caliphate collapsed. ISWA provided both BH and IS-Central with positive momentum during a period when both groups were experiencing negative operational outcomes.

Lastly, each case highlighted different types of leadership. Jolani was handpicked by Baghdadi to lead JN and the IS-Central push into Syria. Jolani is a capable leader who has proven to be difficult to target and, perhaps, even more difficult to control. Jolani still leads JN's rebranded organization HTS, having ideologically split from IS-Central and al Qaeda to pursue his own vision for his organization in Syria. An experienced and effective Coalition targeting apparatus has forced IS-K through a high rate of leadership turnover. In addition, the changes in leadership and disagreements between the Afghan and Pakistani members of IS-K has led to challenges for the group. ISWA has experienced interesting and challenging leadership dynamics of their own. Shekau was named the first emir of ISWA but removed a year later in favor of Barnawi. Shekau felt that there was the potential for an insurrection with the group in 2015, and, while Barnawi has not appeared to be challenged, there is always the possibility with organizations like ISWA.

C. CONCLUSION

Given this theory of UW and analysis of IS-Central's UW campaigns in Syria, Afghanistan, and west Africa, it is clear that IS-Central is arguably one of the most prolific contemporary practitioners of UW. From the author's perspective, the most significant aspect of this research has been the discovery of how UW has evolved from what we, in the United States Special Forces community, consider UW. Much of the U.S. perspective of UW is based off examples from the Jedburgh's efforts to disrupt Nazi forces during World War II or the use of U.S. Special Forces soldiers in Afghanistan, to support the Northern Alliance against the Taliban in 2001. Scholars and practitioners within the traditionalist UW camp would likely disagree with much of the analysis within this thesis because it does not cleanly fit within Jedburgh or Northern Alliance like examples. Traditionalists would most certainly take issue with the assertion that IS, a group that many would label a non-state actor or terrorist organization, can conduct UW at all. To them, UW is reserved for states to execute in pursuit of national interests. However, based on the examination of how IS has expanded outside of Iraq, through the use of sponsored groups conducting guerilla warfare and subversion, against state governments or occupying powers, it is difficult to say that IS is not conducting UW.

In each case, IS actions fit with the U.S. definition of UW.²⁹⁵ In Syria, IS-Central enabled JN to coalesce various jihadist organizations, for the purpose of overthrowing the Syrian government and other factions occupying areas within Syria, through the use of operational and support networks, and guerilla warfare. In Afghanistan, IS-Central enabled IS-K to overthrow the Afghan government and, in areas it controlled, the Taliban, through similar networks and guerilla warfare. Likewise, in west Africa, IS-Central enabled ISWA to overthrow the secular government of Nigeria and, disrupt or coerce other jihadist groups in the region, through the use of its networks and guerilla warfare.

²⁹⁵ The Joint U.S. doctrine definition of UW is "activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerilla force in a denied area." A detailed discussion of UW will be followed in the next section of this thesis. *US Army Training Circular 18-01.1 Unconventional Warfare Mission Planning Guide for the Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha Level*, 1-1.

The degree to which IS-Central supported each expansion effort was different. This variance in support was based on timing, capability, resources, and access to the sponsored group. In the case of JN, IS-Central took a more direct approach by using Syrian members of the organization to lead the campaign. In Afghanistan and west Africa, reporting is mixed; however, it is clear that IS-Central devoted resources to IS-K and ISWA in order to ensure their success. In summary, perhaps the most beneficial lesson to be learned from this research is that UW encompasses many things and can be effective in many ways. To strictly limit its use to cases like the Jedburghs in World War II or Afghanistan in 2001, creates a strategic environment where UW may be the correct solution; however, UW might be overlooked because of narrow perspective. As Kilcullen writes, “while UW remains a viable, low-cost method of indirect warfare, some of the assumptions underpinning traditional UW have diverged from reality in the last two decades.”²⁹⁶ To that end, as the battlefield has changed, so must our understanding and appreciation of UW.

It remains unclear as to how successful IS’s initiatives will be over the long term, IS-Central used their UW strategy to secure footholds in foreign lands, then seized, held, and governed territory in areas outside of Iraq. IS deliberately chose groups to support, locations to expand, and exploited opportunities. IS used media to perform subversion and psychological operations, leveraged operational and support networks, conducted guerilla warfare, and utilized terrorism to achieve its political and military objectives.²⁹⁷ IS-Central’s successful implementation of its UW strategy should not be surprising. The move to expand fits within its stated ideology to create an Islamic caliphate using methods evaluated and tested in Iraq.

Although the group has gone through several name and leadership changes, the U.S. and its coalition of partner nations has been at war with IS-Central since 2003. The question now shifts from how and why IS-Central expanded outside of its core area in Iraq to how does the U.S. defeat IS-Central or prevent it from continuing its expansion. The

²⁹⁶ David Kilcullen, “The Evolution of Unconventional Warfare,” *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 2, no. 1 (June 20, 2019): 61, <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.35>.

²⁹⁷ Craig Whiteside, “Session Three, Panel 6: Information Warfare and the War on ISIS” (January 2017), <https://soundcloud.com/warstudies/kcsc-panel-6?in=warstudies/sets/kcsc-conference>.

commonalities among these case studies may provide planners and intelligence analysts with a framework for identifying groups and locations that may be attractive to IS-Central. It is possible that studying where and why IS-Central may direct its next UW campaign, may help the U.S. and coalition of partners prevent or defeat it.

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